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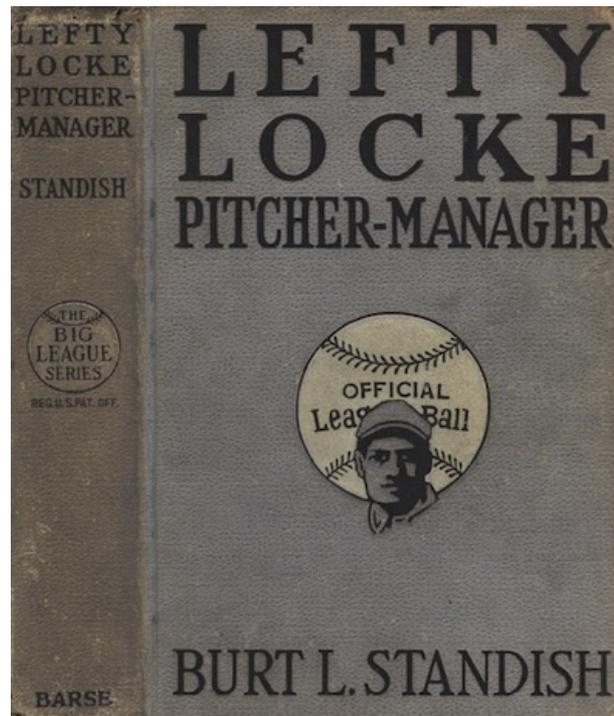
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Lefty had sprained his ankle so seriously that he required assistance to walk from the field. (See Page 103)

LEFTY LOCKE PITCHER-MANAGER

BY
BURT L. STANDISH
Author of "Lefty o' the Bush," "Lefty o' the Big League,"
"Lefty o' the Blue Stockings," "Brick King, Backstop,"
"The Making of a Big Leaguer," etc.

*ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLES L. WRENN*

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LEFTY LOCKE, PITCHER-MANAGER

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LEFTY LOCKE, PITCHER-MANAGER

11

CHAPTER I AN UNEXPECTED OFFER

Lefty Locke gave the man a look of surprise. The soft, bright moonlight was shining full on Weegman's face, and he was chuckling. He was always chuckling or laughing outright, and Locke had grown tired of it. It was monotonous.

"What do you mean?" the pitcher asked. "Tinware for Kennedy! I don't believe I get you."

Weegman snapped his fingers; another little trick that was becoming monotonous and irritating. "That's poor slang perhaps," he admitted; "but you've been in the game long enough to understand it. Collier is going to tie the can to old Jack."

Lefty moved his chair round on the little vine-covered porch in order to face his visitor squarely. Frogs were chorusing in the distance, and the dynamo in the electric power house on the edge of the town kept up its constant nocturnal droning.

"I could scarcely believe you meant just that," said the star slabman of the Blue Stockings soberly. "Being Charles Collier's private secretary, and therefore to a large extent aware of his plans, I presume you know what you're talking about."

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"You can bet on it," laughed Weegman, leaning back and puffing at his cigar. "I'm the man Collier left to carry out his orders regarding the team. I have full instructions and authority."

"But I'm sure Kennedy has no inkling of this. I correspond with him regularly, and I know he expected a new contract to sign before Mr. Collier went abroad. He wrote me that the contract was to be mailed him from New York, but that he supposed Collier, being a sick man, forgot it at the last moment."

Weegman took the cigar from his mouth, and leaned forward on the arm of his chair. "A new manager of the right sort is hard to find," he stated confidentially, "and Collier wasn't ready to let go all holds until he had some one else in view at least."

Locke uttered a smothered exclamation of incredulity. "Do you mean to tell me that Charles Collier was handing old Jack Kennedy a deal as deceitfully crooked as that?" he cried. "I can't believe it. Kennedy has been a faithful and loyal manager. Three years ago, when Collier secured the controlling interest in the club, his bad judgment led him to drop Kennedy and fill his place with Al Carson. You know what happened. Carson made a mess of it, and old Jack was called back at the last moment to save the day. He did it and won the championship for the Blue Stockings by a single game. Since then—"

"Come now!" chuckled Weegman, snapping his fingers again. "You know you were the man who really won that championship by your air-tight pitching. Why do you want to give somebody else the credit? Kennedy merely went in as a pinch hitter—"

"And pounded the only run of the game across the rubber. No matter how air-tight a pitcher's work may be, to win games the team behind him has got to hit. Kennedy was there with the goods."

"That's ancient history now. What has he done since then? As a player, he's a has-been. He's lost his eyes so that he can't even bat in the pinches now. His sun has set, and he may as well retire to his farm and settle down for old age."

"He hasn't lost his brains," asserted Locke warmly. "Playing or pinch hitting is a small part of a manager's business. Once since then he's copped the bunting for us, and last year it was hard luck and injury to players that dropped us into third position."

"I don't blame you," said Weegman good naturedly. "You ought to stand up for him. It shows the right spirit. He gave you your chance—practically plucked you from the brambles. But," he supplemented disparagingly, "he was desperately hard up for twirlers that season. You were sort of a lucky guess on his part. Save for the fact that he's never been able to win a world's championship, old Jack's been picking four-leaf clovers all his life. He's too soft and easy-going for a manager; not enough drive to him."

It was Lefty Locke's turn to laugh, but his merriment held more than a touch of irony. "Jack Kennedy has won pennants or kept in the first division, at least, with teams that would have been fighting for the subcellar under any other manager. When meddlers have not interfered he's always been able to get the last ounce of baseball out of every man under him. While he has handled it the club has always been a big paying proposition. What he has done has been nothing short of miraculous considering the niggardly policy forced upon him by those in power. It's the lowest-salaried team in the league. We have men getting twenty-five hundred or three thousand who should be drawing down twice as much, and would be with any other winning Big League club. Only a man with Kennedy's magnetism and tact could have kept them going at high pressure, could have kept them from being dissatisfied and lying down. What they've accomplished has been done for him, not for the owners. And now you tell me he's to be canned. There's gratitude!"

"My dear man," chirruped Weegman, "baseball is business, and gratitude never goes far in business. Granting what you say may have been true in the past, it's plain enough that the old man's beginning to lose his grip. He fell down last season, and now that the Feds are butting in and making trouble, he's showing himself even more incompetent. Talk about gratitude; it didn't hold Grist or Orth, and now it's reported that Dillon is negotiating with the outlaws. You know what that means; our pitching staff is all shot to pieces. If the players were so true to Kennedy, why didn't they wait for their contracts?"

"How could Jack send them contracts when he hasn't one himself? If he had the authority now, perhaps he could save Dillon for us even yet. Billy Orth is hot-headed and impulsive, and he thought he wasn't given a square deal. As for Grist, old Pete's days are numbered, and he knows it. He was wise to the talk about asking waivers on him. It was a ten-to-one shot he'd have been sent to the minors this coming season. With the Federals offering him a three-year contract at nearly twice as much as he ever received, he'd have been a fool to turn it down. All the same, he had a talk with Kennedy before he signed. Jack couldn't guarantee him anything, so he jumped."

"That's it!" exclaimed Weegman triumphantly. "There's a sample of Kennedy's incompetence right there. He should have baited Grist along, and kept him away from the Feds until the season was well under way, when they would have had their teams made up, and probably wouldn't have wanted Pete. Then, if he didn't come up to form, he could be let out to the minors."

Lefty's face being in the shadow, the other man did not see the expression of contempt that passed over it. For a few minutes the southpaw was too indignant to reply. When he did, however, his voice was level and calm, though a trifle hard.

"So that would have been your way of doing it! Grist has had hard luck with all his investments; I understand he's saved very little. He's a poor man."

Weegman lolled back again, puffing at his cigar. "That's his lookout. Anyway, he's not much loss."

But these confounded Feds aren't through; they're after Dirk Nelson, too. What d'ye know about that! Our best catcher! They seem to be trying to strip our whole team."

"Knowing something about the salaries our players get, probably they figure it should be easy stripping."

Suddenly the visitor leaned forward again, and gazed hard at Locke. He was not laughing now. "Have they been after you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I thought likely. Made you a big offer?"

"Yes."

"What have you done?"

"Nothing."

"Good!" exclaimed Weegman. "It's a good thing for you that you kept your head. They're outside organized ball, and any man who jumps to them will be blacklisted. All this talk about the money they have behind them is pure bluff."

"Think so?"

"I know it. They're plunging like lunatics, and they'll blow up before the season's over. They haven't got the coin."

"Then how does it happen they are signing players for three years, and handing over certified checks in advance for the first year, besides guaranteeing salaries by bank deposits for the full tenure of contracts?"

"Oh, they've got some money, of course," admitted Weegman lightly; "but, as I say, they're spending it like drunken sailors. When the Feds explode, the fools who have jumped to them will find themselves barred from organized ball for all time; they'll be down and out. The outlaws may hurt us a little this year, but after that—nothing doing. Just the same, I own up we've got to put a check on 'em before they rip the Blue Stockings wide open. That's what brings me down here to Fernandon to see you."

"Really!" said Lefty interestedly. "You seem to be shouldering a lot of responsibility."

"I am," chuckled Charles Collier's private secretary. "It was all arranged with Mr. Collier before he sailed. He left me with proper authority. I am to sign up the manager for the team."

"Is that right?" exclaimed Locke, surprised. "Then, according to your own statement, if you want to save the Blue Stockings from being riddled, you'd better be about it."

"I am," said Weegman. "That's why I've come to you."

"For advice?"

"Oh, no!" He laughed heartily. "I don't need that. I know what I'm about. I've brought a contract. I want you to put your name to it. Your salary will be advanced fifteen hundred dollars."

"The Feds offered to double it. As a pitcher—"

"You're not getting this extra money on account of your pitching," interposed Weegman promptly. "I'm offering you the increase of salary to assume the additional duties of manager."

CHAPTER II SOMETHING QUEER

The expression of amazement that leaped into the eyes of Lefty Locke was masked by a shadow. He stiffened, and sat bolt upright, speechless.

Bailey Weegman, having stated the business that had unexpectedly brought him down from the North to the Florida town where the great left-hander of the Blue Stockings was spending the winter with his wife, once more settled back, taking a long, satisfied pull at the stump of his fragrant Havana. He was chuckling beneath his breath. A gentle breeze crept into the leaves of the vine-covered porch and set them whispering like gossips. The dynamo droned drowsily in the distance.

Presently Lefty found his voice. "What's the joke?" he asked a trifle harshly.

"No joke," assured the jovial visitor. "I'm not given to joking. I'm a man of business."

"But it's preposterous! A pitcher for manager!"

"Clark Griffith isn't the only pitcher who has succeeded as a manager."

"Griffith's success came when he was on the decline as a pitcher."

"What's the use to argue, Locke? There's really no good reason why a pitcher shouldn't manage a ball team. You've been doing it with the little amateur club you've been running down here in Fernandon this winter."

"Because necessity compelled. Nobody else would take hold of it. I organized the team for a special reason. It's made up mainly of visitors from the North. No salaries are paid. I had located here for the winter, and I wanted to keep in trim and work my arm into shape for the coming season. I couldn't find anybody else to organize the club and handle it, so I had to. I have only three other players who have been with me from the start. The rest of the nine has been composed of changing players who came and went, college men, or just plain amateurs who have taken to the sport. We have played such teams as could be induced to come here from Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and other places. Handling such a club has given me absolutely no reason to fancy myself qualified to manage one in the Big League."

"I've been keeping my eye on you," said Weegman patronizingly, "and I am satisfied that you can fill the position of playing manager for the Blue Stockings." 22

"You're satisfied-you! How about Charles Collier?"

"As you know, he's a sick man, a very sick man. Otherwise he'd never have dropped everything just at this time to go to Europe along with a physician and trained nurses. He has been too ill to attend properly to his regular business outside baseball, and therefore his business has suffered. He has had heavy financial reverses that have worried him. And now the meddling of the Feds has hurt the value of the ball club. The stock wouldn't bring at a forced sale to-day half what it should be worth. Mr. Collier trusts me. He was anxious to get some of the load off his shoulders. He has left me to straighten out matters connected with the team."

"Where is Mr. Collier now?" asked Locke quietly.

"He was taking the baths at Eaux Chaudes when last heard from, but he has since left there. I can't say where he is at the present time."

"Then how may he be communicated with in case of emergency?"

Chuckling, Weegman lighted a fresh cigar, having tossed the remnant of the other away. The glow of the match fully betrayed an expression of self-satisfaction on his face. 23

"He can't be," he said. "It was his doctor's idea to get him away where he could not be troubled by business of any nature. He may be in Tunis or Naples for all I know."

"It's very remarkable," said Lefty slowly.

"Oh, I don't know," purred the other man, locking his fingers over his little round stomach which seemed so incongruous for a person who was otherwise not overfat. "Really, he was in a bad way. Worrying over business reverses was killing him. His only salvation was to get away from it all."

Locke sat in thought, watching the serene smoker through narrowed lids. There was something queer about the affair, something the southpaw did not understand. True, Collier had seemed to be a nervous, high-strung man, but when Lefty had last seen him he had perceived no indications of such a sudden and complete breakdown. It had been Collier's policy to keep a close and constant watch upon his baseball property, but now, at a time when such surveillance was particularly needed because of the harassing activities of the Federals, having turned authority over to a subordinate, not only had he taken himself beyond the range of easy communication, but apparently he had cut himself off entirely from the sources of inside information concerning baseball affairs. Furthermore, it seemed to Locke that the man who claimed to have been left in full control of that branch of Collier's business was the last person who should have been chosen. What lay behind it all the pitcher was curious to divine. 24

Presently Weegman gave a castanet-like snap of his fingers. "By the way," he said sharply, "how about your arm?"

"My arm?" said Lefty. "You mean--"

"It's all right, isn't it? You know there was a rumor that you hurt it in the last game of the season. Some wise ginks even said you'd never pitch any more."

"I've been doing some pitching for my team here in Fernandon."

"Then, of course, the old wing's all right. You'll be in form again, the greatest left-hander in the business. How about it?"

"I've never been egotistical enough to put that estimate on myself."

"Well, that's what lots of the sharps call you. The arm's as good as ever?"

"If you stop over to-morrow you'll have a chance to judge for yourself. We're scheduled to play a roving independent nine known as the Wind Jammers, and I hear they're some team, of the kind. I shall pitch part of the game, anyhow." 25

"You've been pitching right along?"

"A little in every game lately. I pitched four innings against the Jacksonville Reds and five against the Cuban Giants. We've lost only one game thus far, and that was our second one. The eccentric manager and owner of the Wind Jammers, who calls himself Cap'n Wiley, threatens to take a heavy fall out of us. He has a deaf-mute pitcher, Mysterious Jones, who, he claims, is as good as Walter Johnson."

Weegman laughed derisively. "There's no pitcher as good as Johnson anywhere, much less traveling around with a bunch of hippodromers and bushwhackers. But about your arm-is it all right?"

"I hope to win as many games with it this year as I did last."

"Well, the team's going to need pitchers. The loss of Orth is bound to be felt, and if Dillon jumps— Look here, Locke, we've got to get busy and dig up two or three twirlers, one of top-notch caliber."

"We!"

"Yes, you and I. Of course we can't expect to get a first-stringer out of the bushes; that happens only once in a dog's age. But perhaps Kennedy has some good youngsters up his sleeve. You should know about that. I'm wise that he has consulted you regularly. He's sought your advice, and listened to it; so, in a way, you've had considerable to do with the management of the team. You say you've corresponded with him right along. You ought to know all about his plans. That's one reason why I came to figure on you as the man to fill his place."

"I wondered," murmured Locke.

"That's one reason. For another thing, you've got modesty as well as sense. You don't think you know it all. You're not set in your ways, and probably you'd listen to advice and counsel. Old Jack is hard-headed and stiff; when he makes up his mind there's no turning him. He takes the bit in his teeth, and he wants full swing. He's always seemed to feel himself bigger than the owners. He's butted up against Mr. Collier several times, and Collier's always had to give in."

"As I understand it," said Lefty smoothly, "you think the manager should be a man with few fixed opinions and no set and rigid policy."

"In a way, that's something like it," admitted Weegman. "He mustn't go and do things wholly on his own initiative and without consulting anybody, especially those who have a right to say something about the running of the team. Mr. Collier has placed me in a position that makes it imperative that I should keep my fingers on the pulse of things. I couldn't conscientiously discharge my duty unless I did so. I know I could never get along with Kennedy. The manager must work with me; we'll work together. Of course, in most respects he'll be permitted to do about as he pleases as long as he seems to be delivering the goods; but it must be understood that I have the right to veto, as well as the right to direct, policies and deals. With that understanding to start with, we'll get along swimmingly." He finished with a laugh.

Lefty rose to his feet. "You're not looking for a manager, Weegman," he said. "What you want is a putty man, a figurehead. Under any circumstances, you've come to the wrong market."

CHAPTER III

THE FEDERAL POLICY

Weegman was startled. "What-what's that?" he spluttered, staring upward at the towering figure in white. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I've said," replied the pitcher grimly. "Under no circumstances would I think of stepping into old Jack Kennedy's shoes; but even if he were a perfect stranger to me you could not inveigle me into the management of the Blue Stockings on the conditions you have named. Management!" he scoffed. "Why, the man who falls for that will be a tame cat with clipped claws. It's evident, Mr. Weegman, that you've made a long journey for nothing."

For a moment the visitor was speechless. Lefty Locke's modest, unassuming ways, coupled with undoubted ambition and a desire to get on, had led Charles Collier's secretary to form a very erroneous estimate of him.

"But, man alive," said Weegman, "do you realize what you're doing? You're turning down the chance of a lifetime. I have the contract right here in my pocket, with Collier's name properly attached and witnessed. If you doubt my authority to put the deal through, I can show you my power of attorney from Mr. Collier. In case sentiment or gratitude is holding you back, let me tell you that under no circumstances will Kennedy again be given control of the team. Now don't be a chump and—"

"If I were in your place," interrupted Locke, "I wouldn't waste any more breath."

Weegman snapped his fingers, and got up. "I won't! I didn't suppose you were quite such a boob."

"But you did suppose I was boob enough to swallow your bait at a gulp. You thought me so conceited and greedy that I would jump at the chance to become a puppet, a manager in name only, without any real authority or control. It's plainly your purpose to be the real manager of the team, for what reason or design I admit I don't quite understand. Just how you hypnotized Charles Collier and led him to consent to such a scheme I can't say; but I do say that no successful ball team has ever been run in such a way. You're not fit to manage a ball club, and you wouldn't dare assume the title as well as the authority; probably you know Collier wouldn't stand for that. Yet you intend to force your dictation upon a pseudo-manager. Such meddling would mean muddling; it would knock the last ounce of starch out of the team. If the Blue Stockings didn't finish a bad tailender it would be a miracle."

Bailey Weegman was furious all the way through, but still he laughed and snapped his fingers.

"You're a wise guy, aren't you?" he sneered. "I didn't dream you were so shrewd and discerning. Now let me tell you something, my knowing friend: I've tried to save your neck, and you won't have it."

"My neck!" exclaimed the pitcher incredulously. "You've tried to save my neck?"

"Oh, I know your old soup bone's on the blink; you didn't put anything over me by dodging and trimming when I questioned you about your arm. You knocked it out last year, and you've been spending the winter down here trying to work it back into shape. You can pitch a little against weak bush teams, but you can't even go the whole distance against one of them. That being the case, what sort of a figure do you expect to cut back in the Big League? Up against the slugging Wolves or the hard-hitting Hornets, how long would you last? I've got your number, and you know it."

"If that's so, it seems still more remarkable that you should wish to hold me. Certainly I'd be a great addition to a pitching staff that's smashed already!"

"Did I say anything about your strengthening the pitching staff? I offered to engage you in another capacity. Think I didn't know why you declined to dicker with the Feds when they made you a big offer? You didn't dare, for you know you couldn't deliver the goods. Having that knowledge under my hat, I've been mighty generous with you." Weegman descended to the top step, chuckling.

"Good night," said Locke, longing to hasten the man's departure.

"Think it over," invited Charles Collier's representative. "Now that I'm here, I'll stick around and watch you pitch against these bushwhacking Wind Jammers to-morrow. I imagine your efforts should be amusing. Perhaps you'll change your mind before I catch the train north at Yulee." His chuckling became open laughter.

Lefty turned and entered the cottage, while Weegman walked away in the moonlight, the smoke of his cigar drifting over his shoulder.

Certain circumstances had led Philip Hazelton to enter professional baseball under the pseudonym of "Tom Locke," to which, as he was a left-hander, his associates had added the nickname of "Lefty." These names had stuck when he abruptly moved upward into the Big League. His rise having been rocketlike, the pessimistic and the envious had never wholly ceased to look for the fall of a stick. Thus far, in spite of the fact that each year of his service with the Blue Stockings saw him shouldering more and more of the pitching load, until like Jack Coombs and Ed Walsh he had become known as "the Iron Man," they had looked in vain. And it came to pass that even the most prejudiced was forced to admit that it was Lefty who kept his team "up there" fighting for the bunting all the time.

Toward the close of the last season, however, with the jinx in close pursuit of the Blue Stockings, Locke had pushed himself beyond the limit. At one time the club had seemed to have the pennant cinched, but through the crippling of players it had begun to slip in the latter part of the season. In the desperate struggle to hold on, going against Manager Kennedy's judgment and advice, Lefty did more pitching than any other two men on the staff, and with a little stronger team to support him his winning percentage would have been the highest of any pitcher in the league. It was not his fault that the Blue Stockings did not finish better than third.

In the cozy living room of the little furnished cottage Locke had leased for the brief winter months a remarkably pretty young woman sat reading by a shaded lamp. She looked up from the magazine and smiled at him as he came in. Then she saw the serious look upon his face, and the smile faded.

"What is it, Phil?" she asked, with a touch of anxiety. "Is anything wrong?"

He sat down, facing her, and told her all about his interview with Bailey Weegman. As she listened, her mobile face betrayed wonderment, annoyance, and alarm.

"It's a raw deal for Kennedy," he asserted in conclusion; "and I believe it's wholly of Weegman's devising. I'm sure, when the season ended, Collier had no idea of changing managers. There isn't a more resourceful, astute man in the business than old Jack."

"You're always thinking of others, Phil," she said. "How about yourself? What will happen to you if you don't come to Weegman's terms?"

"Hard to tell," he admitted frankly. "In fact, I've been wondering just where I'd get off. If my arm fails to come back--"

She uttered a little cry. "But you've been telling me--"

"That it was growing better, Janet, that's true. But still it's not what it should be, and I don't dare put much of a strain on it. I don't know that I'd last any time at all in real baseball. Weegman is wise, yet he offered me a contract to pitch and to manage the team. On paper it would seem that he had retained one star twirler for the staff, but if I failed to come back we wouldn't have a single first-string slabman. As a manager, I would be sewed up so that I couldn't do anything without his consent. There's a nigger in the woodpile, Janet."

She had put the magazine aside, and clasped her hands in her lap. He went on:

"It looks to me as if somebody is trying to punch holes in the team, though I don't get the reason

for it. Following Jack Kennedy's advice, I've invested every dollar I could save in the stock of the club. As Weegman says, it's doubtful if the stock would bring fifty cents on the dollar at a forced sale to-day. Collier has met with heavy financial reverses in other lines. He's sick, and he's in Europe where no one can communicate with him. Is somebody trying to knock the bottom out of his baseball holdings in order to get control of the club? It looks that way from the offing."

"But you," said Janet, still thinking of her husband, "you're not tied up with Weegman, and the Federals have made you a splendid offer. You can accept that and land on your feet."

He smiled, shaking his head slowly. "There are several reasons why I don't care to follow that course. The first, and strongest, is my loyalty to Jack Kennedy, the man who gave me a square deal. Then I don't care to bunko anybody, and unless my arm comes back I won't be worth the money the Feds have offered for my services. Lastly, I'm not sure the new league is going to be strong enough to win out against organized baseball."

"But you've said that they seem to have plenty of money behind them. You've said, too, that their plan of dealing directly with players, instead of buying and selling them like chattels or slaves, was the only system that gave the players a just and honest deal."

"That's right," affirmed Lefty. "Slavery in baseball is something more than a joke. The organization has been one of the biggest trusts in the country, and it has dealt in human beings. It has been so that when a man signed his first contract he signed away his right to say what he would do as long as he remained in the game. After that he could be bought, sold, or traded without receiving a dollar of the purchasing or trading price. He had to go where he was sent, regardless of his personal likes, wishes, or convenience. He had to accept whatever salary a manager chose to give him, or get out. Even if his contract had expired with one manager, he couldn't go to another and make a bargain, no matter how much the other manager was willing to give him; the reserve clause held him chained hand and foot. To-day, if the powers chose, I could be sent down to the minors at any old salary the minors chose to pay. I could be sold, like a horse or a dog, and if I didn't like it I could quit the game. That would be my only recourse."

"It's terribly unfair," said Janet.

"Unfair? That's a tame word! On the other hand, the Federals are dealing directly with the players. If they think he's worth it, they give a man a good salary and a bonus besides. The bonus goes to the player, not to the club owner. Added to that, the Federal contracts provide that a club must increase a player's salary at least five per cent. each year, or give him his unconditional release, thus making it possible for him to deal with any other club that may want him."

"It's plain your sympathy is with the Federals."

"If they're not trying to jack up organized baseball and sell out," said Lefty, "I hope they come through."

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGNETIZED BALL

"What are your plans?" asked Janet, after they had discussed the situation in all its phases. "Have you decided on anything?"

The southpaw answered: "I'm going to put Jack Kennedy wise. I'm going to write him a letter to-night, and I shall send him a telegram as soon as the office opens in the morning. It's up to him to get in communication with Collier if there's any way of doing it. You have not received a letter from Virginia lately?"

Virginia Collier, the charming daughter of the owner of the Blue Stockings, was Janet's closest friend.

"No, I have not heard from her in over three weeks, and I don't understand it," returned his wife.

"She seems to have stepped off the map, along with her father. The whole business is mysterious. Why don't you write her at once, explaining what is going on, and send the letter to her last address?"

"I will."

"It may not reach her, but there's no harm in trying. Meanwhile, I'll get busy on mine to Kennedy. There doesn't seem to be much chance to spike Weegman's guns, but it's worth trying."

Locke had the knack of writing a succinct letter; the one he wrote old Jack was concise, yet it was clear and complete. Within two minutes after opening it, doubtless Kennedy would know as much about the situation as did Lefty himself. Yet it was probable that, like the pitcher, the manager would be mystified by the surprising and seemingly sinister maneuvers of Bailey Weegman.

Following Lefty's advice, Janet wrote to Virginia Collier.

Locke rose early the following morning and posted the letters for the first outward mail. He sent a telegram also. Returning past the Magnolia Hotel, to his surprise he perceived Collier's private secretary sitting on the veranda, smoking. Weegman beamed and chuckled.

"Morning," he cried, waving his cigar between two fingers. "The early bird, eh? Been firing off a little correspondence, I presume. Our communications will reach Kennedy in the same mail; and I wired him, too. Quite a little jolt for the old man, but it can't be helped. Of course, he'll have the sense to bow gracefully to the inevitable, and that will clear the air. Afterward, perhaps, you may change your mind regarding my offer."

39

"Perhaps so," returned Lefty pleasantly. "But if I do, I shall be a fit subject for a padded cell." The agreeable look was wiped from Weegman's face as Locke passed on.

Some time after breakfast Lefty returned to the Magnolia to learn if Cap'n Wiley and his ball players had arrived. Approaching, he perceived a queer assortment of strangers lounging on the veranda, and from their appearance he judged that they were members of the team. Many of them looked like old stagers, veterans who had seen better days; some were youthful and raw and inclined to be cock-a-hoop. There was a German, an Italian, an Irishman, and a Swede. One was lanky as a starved greyhound, and apparently somewhere near six feet and six inches tall from his heels to his hair roots. Another was short and fat, and looked as if he had been driven together by some one who had hit him over the head with a board.

In a way, these strangers in Fernandon were most remarkable for their attire. With scarcely an exception, the clothes they wore were weird and fantastic samples of sartorial art; various, and nearly all, prevailing freaks of fashion were displayed. With colored shirts, flaring socks, and giddy neckties, they caused all beholders to gasp. They were most amazingly bejeweled and adorned. With difficulty Locke suppressed a smile as his quick eyes surveyed them.

40

Near the head of the broad steps leading up to the veranda sat a somewhat stocky but exceptionally well-built man of uncertain age. He was almost as swarthy as an Indian, and his dark eyes were swift and keen and shrewd. His black hair was graying on the temples. His coat and trousers, of extravagant cut, were made from pronounced black-and-white-striped material. His fancy waistcoat, buttoned with a single button at the bottom, was adorned with large orange-colored figures. His silk socks were red, his four-in-hand necktie was purple, and the band that encircled the straw hat cocked rakishly upon his head was green. He was smoking a cigar and pouring a steady flow of words into the ear of Bailey Weegman, who made a pretense of not noticing Locke.

"Yes, mate," he was saying, "old man Breckenridge was the most painfully inconsiderate batter I ever had the misfortune to pitch against. Smoke, curves, twisters, slow balls, low balls, and high balls—they all looked alike to him. Now I have a preference; I prefer a high ball, Scotch and carbonic. But it made no difference to Breck; when he put his fifty-five-ounce ash wand against the pill, said pill made a pilgrimage—it journeyed right away to some land distant and remote and unknown, and it did not stay upon the order of its going. When it came right down to slugging, compared with old Breck your Home-run Bakers and Honus Wagners and Napoleon Lajoies are puny and faded shines. And he always seemed able to make connections when he desired; if he rambled forth to the dish yearning for a hit, there was no known method by which the most astute and talented pitcher could prevent him from hitting."

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"Quite a wonder, I must admit!" laughed Weegman, in high amusement. "Rather strange the Big Leagues didn't get hold of such a marvelous batsman, isn't it?"

"Oh, he was on the roster of some Class A team at various times, but he had one drawback that finally sent him away to the remote and uncharted bushes: 'Charley horse' had him in its invidious grip. A spavined snail could beat Breck making the circuit of the sacks, and cross the pan pulled up. Yet, with this handicap, the noble old slugger held the record for home runs in the Tall Grass League. Naturally I had heart failure and Angie Pectoris every time I was compelled to face him on the slab. Likewise, naturally I began meditating with great vigor upon a scheme to circumvent the old terror, and at last my colossal brain concocted a plan that led me to chortle with joy."

42

"I am deeply interested and curious," declared Weegman, as the narrator paused, puffing complacently at his weed. "Go on."

Locke had stopped near at hand, and was listening. Others were hovering about, their ears open, their faces wreathed in smiles.

"It was a simple matter of scientific knowledge and a little skulduggery," pursued the story-teller obligingly. "I possessed the knowledge, and I bribed the bat boy of old Breck's team to perform the skulduggery. I sent to the factory and had some special baseballs manufactured for me, and in the heart of each ball was hidden a tiny but powerful magnet. Then I secretly furnished the rascally bat boy with a specially prepared steel rod that would violently repel any magnet that chanced to wander around into the immediate vicinity of the rod. I instructed the boy to bore Breck's pet bat surreptitiously when the shades of night had fallen, insert the steel rod, and then craftily plug the hole. And may I never sail the briny deep again if that little scoundrel didn't carry out my instructions with the skill of a cutthroat, or a diplomat, even! Nature intended him for higher things. If he isn't hanged some day it won't be his fault."

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"Well, the next time old Breck brought his team to play against us upon our field, I used the magnetized baseballs. I was doing the hurling and in the very first inning the old swatter came up with the sacks charged and two out. He smiled a smile of pity as he bent his baleful glance upon me. 'You'd better walk me, Walter,' says he, 'and force a run; for if you put the spheroid over I'm going to give it a long ride.' I returned his smile with one of the most magnanimous contempt. 'Don't blow up, old boy,' says I. 'With the exception of your batting, you're all in; and I've a notion

that your batting eye is becoming dim and hazy. Let's see you hit this.' Then I passed him a slow, straight one right over the middle of the rubber. He took a mighty swing at it, meaning to slam it over into the next county. Well, mate, may I be keelhauled if that ball didn't dodge the bat like a scared rabbit! Mind you, I hadn't put a thing on it, but the repulsion of that deneutronized steel rod hidden in the bat forced the ball to take the handsomest drop you ever beheld, and the violence with which old Breck smote the vacant ozone caused him to spin round and concuss upon the ground when he sat down. It was a tremendous shock to his nervous system, and it filled me with unbounded jubilation; for I knew I had him at my mercy, literally in the hollow of my hand.

44

"He rose painfully, chagrined and annoyed, but still confident. 'Give me another like that, you little wart!' he ordered savagely, 'and I'll knock the peeling off it.' Beaming, I retorted: 'You couldn't knock the peeling off a prune. Here's what you called for.' And I threw him another slow, straight one.

"Excuse these few tears; the memory of that hallowed occasion makes me cry for joy. He did it again, concussing still more shockingly when he sat down. It was simply an utter impossibility for him to hit that magnetized ball with his doctored bat. But, of course, he didn't know what the matter was; he thought I was fooling him with some sort of a new drop I had discovered. The fact that I was passing him the merry cachinnation peeved him vastly. When he got upon his pins and squared away for the third attempt, his face was the most fearsome I ever have gazed upon. He shook his big bat at me. 'One more,' he raged; 'give me one more, and drop flat on your face the moment you pitch the ball, or I'll drive it straight through the meridian of your anatomy!'

"Let me tell you now, mate, that Breck was a gentleman, and that was the first and only time I ever knew him to lose his temper. Under the circumstances, he was excusable. I put all my nerve-shattering steam into the next pitch, and, instead of dropping, the ball hopped over his bat when he smote at it. I had fanned the mighty Breckenridge, and the wondering crowd lifted their voices in hosannas. Yet I know they regarded it in the nature of an accident, and not until I had whiffed him three times more in the same game did either Breck or the spectators arrive at the conviction that I had something on him.

45

"After that," said the narrator, as if in conclusion, "I had him eating out of my hand right up to the final and decisive game of the season."

Weegman begged the fanciful romancer to tell what happened in the last game.

"Oh, we won," was the assurance; "but we never would have if Breck had been wise the last time he came to bat. It was in the ninth inning, with the score three to two in our favor, two down, and runners on second and third. Knowing it was Breck's turn to hit, I was confident we had the game sewed up. But the confidence oozed out of me all of a sudden when I saw the big fellow paw the clubs over to select a bat other than his own. Clammy perspiration started forth from every pore of my body. With any other swat stick beside his own, I knew he was practically sure to drive any ball I could pitch him over the fence. The agony of apprehension which I endured at that moment gave me my first gray hairs.

46

"Although I did not know it at the time, it chanced that Breck had selected the bat of another player who had had it bored and loaded with an ordinary steel rod. This, you can clearly understand, made it more than doubly certain that he would hit the magnetized ball, which would be attracted instead of repelled. Had I known this, I shouldn't have had the heart to pitch at all.

"As the noble warrior stood up to the pan, I considered what I could pitch him. Curves could not fool him, and he literally ate speed. Therefore, without hope, I tossed him up a slow one. Now it chanced that the old boy had decided to try a surprise, having become disheartened by his efforts to slug; he had resolved to attempt to bunt, knowing such a move would be unexpected. So he merely stuck out his bat as the sphere came sailing over. The magnet was attracted by the steel rod, and the ball just jumped at the bat, against which it struck—and stuck! I hope never to tell the truth again, mate, if I'm not stating a simple, unadulterated, unvarnished fact. The moment the ball touched the bat it stuck fast to it as if nailed there. Breck was so astonished that he stood in his tracks staring at the ball like a man turned to stone. I was likewise paralyzed for an extemporaneous fraction of time, but my ready wit quickly availed me. Bounding forward, I wrenched the ball from the bat and tagged old Breck with it, appealing to the umpire for judgment. There was only one thing his umps could do. He had seen the batter attempt to bunt, had seen bat and ball meet, and had seen me secure the ball on fair ground and put it on to the hitter. He declared Breckenridge out, and that gave us the game and the championship."

47

Bailey Weegman lay back and roared. In doing so, he seemed to perceive Lefty for the first time. As soon as he could get his breath, he said:

"Oh, I say, Locke, let me introduce you. This is Cap'n Wiley, owner and manager of the Wind Jammers."

CHAPTER V

A MAN OF MYSTERY

48

The swarthy little fabulist rose hastily to his feet, making a quick survey of the southpaw. "Am I

indeed and at last in the presence of the great Lefty Locke?" he cried, his face beaming like the morning sun in a cloudless sky. "Is it possible that after many weary moons I have dropped anchor in the same harbor with the most salubriously efficacious port-side flinger of modern times? Pardon my deep emotion! Slip me your mudhook, Lefty; let me give you the fraternal grip."

He grabbed Locke's hand and wrung it vigorously, while the other members of the Wind Jammers pressed nearer, looking the Big League pitcher over with interest.

"In many a frozen igloo," declared Wiley, "I have dreamed of this day when I should press your lily-white fingers. Oft and anon during my weary sojourn in that far land of snow and ice have I pictured to myself the hour when we should stand face to face and exchange genuflections and greetings. And whenever a smooched and tattered months-old newspaper would drift in from civilization, with what eager and expectant thrills did I tremulously turn to the baseball page that I might perchance read thereon how you had stung the Hornets, bitten the Wolves, clipped the claws of the Panthers, or plucked the feathers from the White Wings!"

"And I have been wondering," confessed Lefty, "if you could be the original Cap'n Wiley of whom I heard so many strange tales in my boyhood. It was reported that you were dead."

"Many a time and oft hath that canard been circulated. According to rumor, I have demised a dozen times or more by land and sea; but each time, like the fabled Phoenix, I have risen from my ashes. During the last few fleeting years I have been in pursuit of fickle fortune in far-off Alaska, where it was sometimes so extremely cold that fire froze and we cracked up the congealed flames into little chunks which we sold to the Chilkoots and Siwashas as precious bright red stones. Strange to say, whenever I have related this little nanny goat it has been received with skepticism and incredulity. The world is congested with doubters."

"When you wrote me," admitted Locke, "proposing to bring your Wind Jammers here to play the Fernandon Grays, I thought the letter was a hoax. At first I was tempted not to answer it, and when I did reply it was out of curiosity more than anything else; I wanted to see what the next twist of the joke would be."

"Let me assure you that you will find playing against the Wind Jammers no joke. I have conglomerated together the fastest segregation of baseball stars ever seen outside a major league circuit, and I say it with becoming and blushing modesty. Look them over," he invited, with a proud wave of his hand toward the remarkable group of listeners. "It has always been my contention that there are just as good players to be found outside the Big League as ever wore the uniform of a major. I have held that hard luck, frowning fate, or contumelious circumstances have conspired to hold these natural-born stars down and prevent their names from being chiseled on the tablet of fame. Having gathered unto myself a few slippery shekels from my mining ventures in the land where baseball games begin at the hour of midnight, I have now set out to prove my theory, and before I am through I expect to have all balldom sitting up agog and gasping with wonderment."

"I wish you luck," replied Lefty. "If you don't do anything else, you ought to get some sport out of it. I presume you still ascend the mound as a pitcher?"

"Oh," was the airy answer, "on rare occasions I give the gaping populace a treat by propelling the sphere through the atmosphere. When my projector is working up to its old-time form, I find little difficulty in leading the most formidable batters to vainly slash the vacant ether. The weather seeming propitious, I may burn a few over this p.m. I trust you will pitch also."

"I think I shall start the game, at least."

Bailey Weegman butted in. "But he won't finish it, Wiley. Like yourself, he's not doing as much pitching as he did once." His laugh was significant.

The owner of the Wind Jammers looked startled. "Tell me not in mournful numbers that your star is already on the decline!" he exclaimed, looking at Locke with regret. "That's what the Big Leagues do to a good man; they burn him out like a pitch-pine knot. I've felt all along that the Blue Stockings were working you too much, Lefty. Without you on their roster ready to work three or four times a week in the pinches, they never could have kept in the running."

"You're more than complimentary," said Locke, after giving Weegman a look. "But I think I'll be able to shake something out of my sleeve this season, the same as ever."

"Then don't let them finish you, don't let them grind you to a frazzle," advised Wiley. "For the first time in recent history you have a chance for your white alley; the Federals are giving you that. If you're not already enmeshed in the folds of a contract, the Feds will grab you and hand you a square deal."

Weegman rose, chuckling and snapping his fingers. "All this talk about what the Feds can do is gas!" he declared. "They're getting nothing but the soreheads and deadwood of organized baseball, which will be vastly better off without the deserters. Cripples and has-beens may make a good thing out of the Feds for a short time. Perhaps Locke would find it profitable to jump." His meaning was all too plain.

Lefty felt like taking the insinuating fellow by the neck and shaking him until his teeth rattled, but outwardly he was not at all ruffled or disturbed. "Mr. Weegman," he said, "is showing pique because I have not seen fit to sign up as manager of the Blue Stockings. He professes to have authority from Charles Collier to sign the manager, Collier having gone abroad for his health."

"If anybody doubts my authority," shouted Weegman, plunging his hand into an inner pocket of his coat, "I can show the documents that will--"

The southpaw had turned his back on him. "I understand you have a clever pitcher in the man known as Mysterious Jones, Wiley," he said.

"A pippin!" was the enthusiastic answer. "I'll give you a chance to see him sagaciate to-day."

"He is a deaf-mute?"

"He couldn't hear a cannon if you fired it right under the lobe of his ear, and he does his talking with his prehensile digits. Leon Ames in his best days never had anything on Jones."

"Strange I never even heard of him. Our scouts have scoured the bushes from one end of the country to the other."

"I never collided with any baseball scouts in Alaska," said Wiley.

"Oh! You found Jones in Alaska?"

"Pitching for a team in Nome."

"But baseball up there! I didn't know--"

"Oh, no; nobody ever thinks of baseball up there, but in the all too short summer season there's something doing in that line. Why, even modern dances have begun to run wild in Alaska, so you see they're right up to the present jiffy."

"Where did this Jones originally hail from?"

"Ask me! I don't know. Nobody I ever met knew anything about him, and what he knows about himself he won't tell. He's mysterious, you understand; but his beautiful work on the slab has caused my classic countenance to break into ripples and undulations and convolutions of mirth."

"Where is he? I'd like to give him the once over."

"I think he's out somewhere prowling around the town and sizing up the citizens. That's one of his little vagaries; he has a combustible curiosity about strangers. Every place we go he wanders around for hours lamping the denizens of the burg. Outside baseball, strange people seem to interest him more than anything in the world; but once he has taken a good square look at a person, henceforth and for aye that individual ceases to attract him; if he ever gives anybody a second look, it is one of absolute indifference. Oh, I assure you with the utmost voracity that Jones is an odd one."

"He must be," agreed Lefty.

"Ay tank, cap'n," said Oleson, the Swede outfielder, "that Yones now bane comin' up the street."

Wiley turned and gazed at an approaching figure. "Yes," he said, "that's him. Turn your binnacle lights on him, Lefty; behold the greatest pitcher adrift in the uncharted regions of baseball."

CHAPTER VI PECULIAR BEHAVIOR

Jones was rather tall and almost slender, although he had a fine pair of shoulders. His arm was as long as Walter Johnson's. His face was as grave as that of the Sphinx, and held more than a touch of the same somber sadness. His eyes were dark and keen and penetrating; with a single glance they seemed to pierce one through and through. And they were ever on the move, like little ferrets, searching, searching, searching. As he approached the hotel, he met a man going in the opposite direction, and he half paused to give the man a sharp, lance-like stare. Involuntarily the man drew aside a trifle and, walking on, turning to look back with an expression of mingled questioning and resentment. But Jones had resumed his habitual pace, his appearance that of a person who, already overburdened, had received one more disappointment.

Barney O'Reilly, the shortstop, laughed. "Sure," said he, "it's a bit of a jump old Jonesy hands any one he looks at fair and hard."

Lefty Locke felt a throb of deep interest and curiosity. There was something about the deaf-mute pitcher of the Wind Jammers that aroused and fascinated him instantly. His first thought was that the man might be mentally unbalanced to a slight degree; but, though he knew not why, something caused him to reject this conviction almost before it was formed. Apparently Jones was well named "Mysterious."

"There's the bird, Lefty," said Cap'n Wiley proudly. "There's the boy who'd make 'em sit up and take notice if ever he got a show in the Big League. Yours truly, the Marine Marvel, knew what he was doing when he plucked that plum in the far-away land of lingering snows."

A queer sound behind him, like a hissing, shuddering gasp, caused Locke to look around quickly. The sound had come from Weegman, who, face blanched, mouth agape, eyes panic-stricken, was staring at the approaching pitcher. Amazement, doubt, disbelief, fear—he betrayed all these emotions. Even while he leaned forward to get a better view over the shoulder of a man before

him, he shrank back, crouching like one ready to take to his heels.

Like a person pleased by the sound of his own voice, Cap'n Wiley rattled on in laudation of his mute pitcher. No one save Locke seemed to notice Weegman; and so wholly fascinated by the sight of Jones was the latter that he was quite oblivious to the fact that he had attracted any attention.

"Smoke!" Wiley was saying. "Why, mate, when he uses all his speed, a ball doesn't last a minute; the calorie friction it creates passing through the air burns the cover off."

"Ya," supplemented Shaeffer, the catcher, "und sometimes it sets my mitt afire."

"Some speed!" agreed Lefty, as Jones, his head bent, reached the foot of the steps. "He looks tired."

"He's always that way after he tramps around a strange town," said the owner of the Wind Jammers. "Afterward he usually goes to bed and rests, and he comes out to the games as full of fire and kinks as a boy who has stuffed himself with green apples. I'll introduce you, Locke."

The southpaw looked round again. Weegman was gone; probably he had vanished into the convenient door of the hotel. Cap'n Wiley drew Lefty forward to meet the voiceless pitcher, and, perceiving a stranger, Mysterious Jones halted at the top of the steps and stabbed him with a stare full in the face. Lefty had never looked into such searching, penetrating eyes.

Wiley made some deft and rapid movements with his hands and fingers, using the deaf-and-dumb language to make Jones aware of the identity of the famous Big League pitcher. Already the mute had lapsed into disappointed indifference, but he accepted Locke's offered hand and smiled in a faint, melancholy way.

"He's feeling especially downcast to-day," explained Wiley, "and so he'll pitch like a fiend this afternoon. He always twirls his best when he's gloomiest; appears to entertain the delusion that he's taking acrimonious revenge on the world for handing him some sort of a raw deal. It would be a shame to use him against you the whole game, Lefty; he'd make your Grays look like a lot of infirm prunes."

"Spare us," pleaded Locke, in mock apprehension.

Jones did not linger long with his teammates on the veranda. With a solemn but friendly bow to Lefty, he passed on into the hotel, Wiley explaining that he was on his way to take his regular daily period of rest. Through the open door the southpaw watched the strange pitcher walk through the office and mount a flight of stairs. And from the little writing room Locke saw Bailey Weegman peer forth, his eyes following the mysterious one until the latter disappeared. Then Weegman hurried to the desk and interviewed the clerk, after which he made an inspection of the names freshly written upon the hotel register.

The man's behavior was singular, and Lefty decided that, for some reason, Weegman did not care to encounter Jones. This suspicion was strengthened when, scarcely more than an hour later, Charles Collier's private secretary appeared at the little cottage occupied by Locke and his wife, and stated that he had made a change from the Magnolia Hotel to the Florida House, a second-rate and rather obscure place on the edge of the colored quarter.

"Couldn't stand for Wiley and his gang of bushwhackers," Weegman explained. "They made me sick, and I had to get out, even though I'm going to leave town at five-thirty this afternoon. That's the first through train north that I can catch. Thought I'd let you know so you could find me in case you changed your mind about that offer."

"You might have spared yourself the trouble," said Locke coldly.

Weegman made a pretense of laughing. "No telling about that. Mules are obstinate, but even they can be made to change their minds if you build a hot enough fire under them. Don't forget where you can find me."

Lefty watched him walking away, and noted that his manner was somewhat nervous and unnatural. "I wonder," murmured the pitcher, "why you put yourself to so much discomfort to avoid Mysterious Jones."

Directed by Locke, the Grays put in an hour of sharp practice that forenoon. As Lefty had stated, the team was practically comprised of winter visitors from the North. Some of them had come South for their health, too. Three were well along in the thirties, and one had passed forty. Yet, for all such handicaps, they were an enthusiastic, energetic team, and they could play the game. At least five of them had once been stars on college nines. Having never lost their love for the game, they had rounded into form wonderfully under the coaching of the Big League pitcher. Also, in nearly every game they pulled off more or less of the stuff known as "inside baseball."

They had been remarkably successful in defeating the teams they had faced, but Locke felt sure that, in spite of the conglomerate and freakish appearance of the Wind Jammers, it was not going to be an easy thing to take a fall out of Cap'n Wiley's aggregation of talent. The self-styled "Marine Marvel" had a record; with players culled from the brambles as he knocked about the country, he had, in former days, put to shame many a strong minor league outfit that had patronizingly and somewhat disdainfully consented to give him an engagement on an off date. Unless the eccentric and humorously boastful manager of the Wind Jammers had lost much of his judgment and cunning during the recent years that he had been out of the public eye, the fastest independent team would have to keep awake and get a fair share of the breaks in order to trounce him.

Locke warmed up his arm a little, but, even though he felt scarcely a twinge of the lameness and stiffness that had given him so much apprehension, he was cautious. At one time, when the trouble was the worst, he had not been able to lift his left hand to his mouth. A massage expert in Fernandon had done much for him, and he hoped that he had done not a little for himself by perfecting a new style of delivery that did not put so much strain upon his shoulder. Still, until he should be forced to the test, he could never feel quite sure that he would be the same puzzle to the finest batsmen that he had once been. And it must be confessed that he had looked forward with some dread to the day when that test should come.

Suddenly he resolved that, in a way, he would meet the test at once. Doubtless the Wind Jammers were batters of no mean caliber, for Wiley had always got together a bunch of sluggers.

"I'll do it," he decided; "I'll go the limit. If I can't do that now, after the rest I've had and the doctoring my arm has received, there's not one chance in a thousand that I'll ever be able to pitch in fast company again."

CHAPTER VII

THE TEST

Nearly all Fernandon turned out to the game. Many residents of the town, as well as a large number of the visitors from the North, came in carriages and automobiles. The covered reserved seats were filled, and, shielding themselves from the sun with umbrellas, an eager crowd packed the bleachers. On the sandy grass ground back of third base a swarm of chattering, grinning colored people sat and sprawled. Holding themselves proudly aloof from the negroes, a group of lanky, sallow "poor whites," few of whom could read or write, were displaying their ignorance by their remarks about the game and the players. The mayor of the town had consented to act as umpire. At four o'clock he called "play."

"Now we're off!" sang Cap'n Wiley, waltzing gayly forth to the coaching position near third. "Here's where we hoist anchor and get away with a fair wind."

Nuccio, the olive-skinned Italian third baseman, selected his bat and trotted to the pan, grinning at Locke.

"Oh, you Lefty!" said he. "We gotta your number."

"Put your marlinespike against the pill and crack the coating on it," urged Wiley.

George Sommers, catcher for the Grays, adjusted his mask, crouched, signaled. Locke whipped one over the inside corner, and Nuccio fouled.

"Nicked it!" cried the Marine Marvel. "Now bust it on the figurehead and make for the first mooring. Show our highly steamed friend Lefty that he's got to pitch to-day if he don't want the wind taken out of his sails."

The southpaw tried to lead Nuccio into reaching, but the batter caught himself in his swing. "Put the ball over, Left," he pleaded. "Don't givea me the walk."

The pitcher smiled and handed up a hopper. The batter fouled again, lifting the ball on to the top of the covered seats.

"I don't think you need worry about walking," said Sommers, returning after having made a vain start in pursuit of the sphere. "You're in a hole already."

Nuccio smiled. "Wait," he advised. "I spoil the gooda ones."

Another ball followed, then Lefty warped one across the comer. Nuccio drove it into right for a pretty single, bringing shouts of approval from the bench of the Wind Jammers. Wiley addressed Locke.

"Really," he said, "I fear me much that you undervalue the batting capacity of my players. One and all, individually and collectively, they are there with the healthy bingle. Please, I beg of you, don't let them pound you off the slab in the first inning, for that would puncture a hard-earned reputation and bring tears of regret to my tender eyes. For fear that you may be careless or disdainful, I warn you that this next man can't touch anything down around his knees; his arms being attached to his shoulders at such a dim and distant altitude, he finds it difficult to reach down so far, even with the longest bat."

Luther Bemis, the player referred to, was the marvelously tall and lanky center fielder of the Wind Jammers. He had a queer halting walk, like a person on stilts, and his appearance was so ludicrous that the spectators tittered and laughed outright. Their amusement did not disturb him, for he grinned cheerfully as he squared away, waving his long bat.

"Don't you pay no 'tention to the cap 'n, Lefty," he drawled, in a nasal voice. "I can hit um acrost the knees jest as well as anywhere else. He's tryin' to fool ye."

"Let's see about that," said Locke, putting one over low and close on the inside.

Bemis smashed out a hot grounder and went galloping to first with tremendous, ground-covering

strides. For all of his awkward walk and the fact that he ran like a frightened giraffe, it would have required an excellent sprinter to beat him from the plate to the initial sack.

Norris, the shortstop, got his hand on the ball and stopped it, but it twisted out of his fingers. It was an error on a hard chance, for by the time he secured the sphere there was no prospect of getting either runner.

"Now that's what I call misfortune when regarded from one angle, and mighty lucky if viewed from another," said Wiley. "Beamy carries a rabbit's foot; that's why he's second on our batting disorder. He does things like that when they're least expected the most."

Schaeffer was coaching at first. "Is it Lefty Locke against us pitching?" he cried. "And such an easiness! Took a lead, efrybody, and move along when the Irish hit."

"I hate to do ut," protested Barney O'Reilley, shaking his red head as he walked into position. "It's a pain it gives me, Lefty, but I have to earn me salary. No bad feelings, ould man. You understand."

"Just one moment," called Wiley, holding up his hand. "Sympathy impels me. I have a tender heart. Lefty, I feel that I must warn you again. This descendant of the Irish nobility can hit anything that sails over the platter. If it were not a distressing fact that Schepps, who follows, is even a more royal batter, I would advise you to walk O'Reilley. As it is, I am in despair."

The crowd was not pleased. It began to beg Locke to fan O'Reilley, and when the Irishman missed the first shoot the pleadings increased.

"Barney is sympathetic also," cried Cap'n Wiley; "but he'd better not let his sympathy carry him amain, whatever that is. I shall fine him if he doesn't hit the ball."

Locke had begun to let himself out in earnest, for the situation was threatening. It would not be wise needlessly to permit the Wind Jammers to get the jump. They were a confident, aggressive team, and would fight to the last gasp to hold an advantage. The southpaw realized that it would be necessary to do some really high-grade twirling to prevent them from grabbing that advantage in short order.

Tug Schepps, a tough-looking, hard-faced person, was swinging two bats and chewing tobacco as he waited to take his turn. He was a product of the sand lots.

"Land on it, Barney, old top!" urged Tug. "Swat it on der trade-mark an' clean der sacks. Dis Lefty boy don't seem such a much."

Locke shot over a high one.

"Going up!" whooped O'Reilley, ignoring it.

"Get 'em down below the crow's nest," entreated Wiley. "You're not pitching to Bemis now."

The southpaw quickly tried a drop across the batter's shoulders, and, not expecting that the ball had so much on it, Barney let it pass. He made a mild kick when the mayor-umpire called a strike. "It's astigmatism ye have, Mr. Mayor," he said politely.

The next one was too close, but O'Reilley fell back and hooked it past third base. Even though the left fielder had been playing in, Nuccio might possibly have scored had he not stumbled as he rounded the corner. Wiley started to grab the fallen runner, but remembered the new rule just in time, and desisted.

"Put about!" he shouted. "Head back to the last port!"

The Italian scrambled back to the sack, spluttering. He reached it ahead of the throw from the fielder. Cap'n Wiley pretended to shed tears.

"Is it possible," he muttered, shaking his head, "that this is the great Lefty Locke? If so, it must be true that his star is on the decline. Alas and alack, life is filled with such bitter disappointments."

Whether the regret of Wiley was real or pretended, it was shared by a large part of the spectators, who were friendly to the local team; for Locke had become very well liked in Fernandon, both by the citizens of the place and the Northern visitors.

It must not be imagined that, with the corners crowded and no one down, Locke was fully at his ease. He had decided to make this game the test of his ability to "come back," and already it looked as if the first inning would give him his answer. If he could not successfully hold in check this heterogeneous collection of bush talent, it was easy to understand what would happen to him the next time he essayed to twirl for the Blue Stockings. A sickening sense of foreboding crept over him, but his lips wore a smile, and he showed no sign of being perturbed.

Schepps was at the plate, having discarded one of the bats he had been swinging. He grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Always t'ought I could bump a real league pitcher," he said. "Put one acrost, pal, an' I'll tear der cover off."

Locke hesitated. He had been using the new delivery he had acquired to spare his shoulder. In previous games it had proved effective enough to enable him to continue four or five innings, but now-

Suddenly he whipped the ball to third, sending Nuccio diving headlong back to the sack. The crafty little Italian had been creeping off, ready to make a flying dash for the plate. He was safe by a hair.

"Not on your movie film!" cried Cap'n Wiley. "It can't be done!"

Lefty did not hear him. He was gazing past the Marine Marvel at the face of a man who, taking care to keep himself unobtrusively in the background, was peering at him over the shoulders of a little group of spectators—a grinning, mocking derisive face.

It was Weegman. And Weegman knew!

CHAPTER VIII AT NECESSITY'S DEMAND

72

Even after the ball was thrown back from third, and Lefty had turned away, that grinning, mocking face continued to leer at him. Wherever he looked it hovered before his mental vision like a taunting omen of disaster. He was "all in," and Weegman knew it. The man had told him, with sneering bluntness, that his "old soup bone was on the blink." Yet, entertaining this settled conviction regarding Locke's worthlessness as a pitcher, Weegman had made a long and wearisome journey in order that he might be absolutely sure, by putting the deal through in person, of signing the southpaw for the Blue Stockings at an increased salary. The very fact that he had been offered the position of manager, under conditions that would make him a mere puppet without any real managerial authority, gave the proposition a blacker and more sinister look.

Sommers was signaling. Lefty shook his head to rid himself of that hateful chimera. Misunderstanding, the catcher quickly changed the sign. The pitcher delivered the ball called for first, and it went through Sommers like a fine shot through an open sieve.

73

Nuccio scored from third with ease, Bemis and O'Reilley advancing at the same time. The Wind Jammers roared from the bench. Cap'n Wiley threw up his hands.

"Furl every stitch!" cried the manager of the visitors. "Batten the hatches! The storm is upon us! It's going to be a rip-sizzler. I'm afraid the wreck will be a total loss."

Covering the plate, Lefty took the ball from Sommers.

"How did you happen to cross me?" asked the catcher.

"It was my fault," was the prompt acknowledgment; "but it won't happen again."

"I hope not," said Sommers. He wanted to suggest that Locke should retire at once and let Matthews take up the pitching, but he refrained.

The southpaw was doing some serious thinking as he walked back to the mound. However well his newly acquired delivery had seemed to serve him on other occasions, he was convinced that it would not do now; either he must pitch in his own natural way and do his best, or he must retire and let Dade Matthews try to check the overconfident aggressors. If he retired, he would prolong the uncertainty in his own mind; he would leave himself in doubt as to whether or not there was any prospect of his return to the Big League as a twirler worthy of his hire. More than doubt, he realized, he would be crushed by a conviction that he was really down and out.

74

"I've pampered my arm long enough," he decided. "I'm going to find out if there's anything left in it."

Perhaps the decision was unwise. The result of the game with the Wind Jammers was of no importance, but Locke felt that, for his own peace of mind, he must know what stuff was left in him. And there was no one present with authority, no coach, no counselor, to restrain him. There was a strange, new gleam in his eyes when he once more toed the slab. His faint smile had not vanished, but it had taken lines of grimness.

Schepps tapped the plate with his bat. "Come on, pal," he begged; "don't blow up. Gimme one of der real kind, an' lemme have a swat at it."

The crowd was silent; even the chattering darkies had ceased their noise. Only the Wind Jammers jubilated on the bench and the coaching lines.

Poising himself, Locke caught Sommer's signal, and nodded. Then he swung his arm with the old free, supple, whiplash motion, and the ball that left his fingers cut the air like a streak of white, taking a really remarkable hop. Schepps' "swat" was wasted.

75

"Now, dat's like it!" cried the sandlotter. "Where've you been keepin' dat kind, old boy? Gimme a duplicate."

Lefty watched Bemis, the long-legged ground coverer, working away toward the plate, and drove him back. But he seemed to have forgotten O'Reilley, and the Irishman was taking a lead on which he should have little trouble in scoring if Schepps drove out a safety. Farther and farther he crept up toward third.

Sommers tugged at his mask with an odd little motion. Like a flash the southpaw whirled about and shot the ball to second, knowing some one would be there to take the throw. Mel Gates was the man who covered the bag, and O'Reilley found himself caught between second and third. Gates went after him, and the Irishman ran toward third. But Locke had cut in on the line, and he

took a throw from Gates that caused O'Reilley to turn back abruptly. Behind Gates, Norris was covering the cushion. Tremain came down a little from third to back Lefty up.

Colby had raced from first base to the plate in order to support Sommers, for Bemis was swiftly creeping down to make a dash. On the coaching line, Cap'n Wiley did a wild dance. The spectators were thrilled by the sudden excitement of the moment.

76

Lefty ran O'Reilley back toward second, and he knew Bemis was letting himself out in an attempt to score. Swinging instantly, Locke made a rifle-accurate throw to Sommers, who jammed the ball on to the long-gear runner as he was sliding for the plate. The affair had been so skillfully managed that not only was O'Reilley prevented from advancing, but also the attempt to sneak a tally while the Irishman was being run down had resulted disastrously for the Wind Jammers.

"Dat's der only way dey can get us out," said Schepps. "Dis Lefty person looks to me like a lemon!"

Cap'n Wiley was philosophically cheerful. "Just a little lull in the tornado," he said. "It's due to strike again in a minute."

Lefty looked the confident Schepps over, and then he gave him a queer drop that deceived him even worse than the swift hopper. The spectators, who had been worried a short time before, now expressed their approval; and when, a minute later, the southpaw whiffed the sandlotter, there was a sudden burst of handclapping and explosions of boisterous laughter from the delighted darkies.

"Wh-who's dat man said lemon?" cried one. "Dat Lefty pusson sho' handed him one dat time!"

"Is it possible," said Cap'n Wiley, "that I'm going to be compelled to revise my dates regarding that wreck?" Then he roared at the Swede: "Get into the game, Oleson! It's your watch on deck, and you want to come alive. The wrong ship's being scuttled."

77

"Aye, aye, captain!" responded Oleson. "Mebbe Ay do somethin' when Ay get on the yob. Yust keep your eye on me." Believing himself a hitter superior to the men who had touched Locke up so successfully at the beginning of the game, he strode confidently forth, for all of the failure of Schepps.

Sizing up the Swede, Lefty tested him with a curve, but Oleson betrayed no disposition to reach. A drop followed, and the batter fouled it. His style of swinging led the southpaw to fancy that he had a preference for drops, and therefore Locke wound the next one round his neck, puncturing his weakness. Not only did Oleson miss, but he swung in a manner that made it doubtful if he would drive the ball out of the infield if he happened to hit one of that kind.

"Hit it where you missed it!" implored Wiley. "Don't let him bamboozle you with the chin wipers." Then he turned on O'Reilley. "Cast off that mooring! Break your anchor loose and get under way! Man the halyards and crack on every stitch! You've got to make port when Ole stings the horsehide."

78

In spite of himself, Lefty was compelled to laugh outright at the Marine Marvel's coaching contortions. "Calm yourself, cap'n," he advised. "The hurricane is over."

"How can I calm myself when calamity threatens?" was the wild retort. "You are a base deceiver, Lefty. Such chicanery is shameful! I don't know what chicanery means, but it seems to fit the offense."

And now the spectators fell to laughing at the swarthy little man, who did not seem to be so very offensive, after all, and who was injecting more than a touch of vaudeville comedy into the game.

Oleson waited patiently, still determined to hit, although somewhat dismayed by his two failures to gauge the left-hander's slants. But when Lefty suddenly gave him another exactly like the last, he slashed at it awkwardly and fruitlessly. The crowd broke into a cheer, and the Swede turned dazedly from the plate, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"That Lefty he bane some pitcher," admitted Oleson. "He got a good yump ball."

CHAPTER IX

TORTURING DOUBT

79

To a degree, Locke had satisfied himself that he still had command of his speed and carves; but the experience had also taught him that his efforts to acquire a new delivery as effective as his former style of pitching, and one that would put less strain upon his shoulder, had been a sheer waste of time. Working against batters who were dangerous, his artificial delivery had not enabled him to pitch the ball that would hold them in check. He had mowed them down, however, when he had resorted to his natural form.

But what would that do to his shoulder? Could he pitch like that and go the full distance with no fear of disastrous results? Should he attempt it, even should he succeed, perhaps the morrow would find him with his salary wing as weak and lame and lifeless as it had been after that last heart-breaking game in the Big League.

Involuntarily, as he left the mound, he looked around for Weegman, who had disappeared. It gave Lefty some satisfaction to feel that, for the time being, at least, he had wiped the mocking grin from the schemer's face.

80

Cap'n Wiley jogged down from third, an expression of injured reproof puckering his countenance. "I am pained to the apple core," he said. "My simple, trusting nature has received a severe shock. Just when I thought we had you meandering away from here, Lefty, you turned right round and came back. If you handed us that one lone tally to chirk us along, let me reassure you that you made the mistake of your young life; I am going to ascend the hillock and do some volleying, which makes it extensively probable that the run we have garnered will be sufficient to settle the game."

"Don't be so unfeeling!" responded Locke. "Give us Mysterious Jones."

"Oh, perchance you may be able to get on the sacks with me pushing 'em over; but if Jones unlimbered his artillery on you, he'd mow you down as fast as you toddled up to the pentagon. You see, I wish the assemblage to witness some slight semblance of a game."

In action upon the slab, Wiley aroused still further merriment. His wind-up before delivering the ball was most bewildering. His writhing, squirming twists would have made a circus contortionist gasp. First he seemed to tie himself into knots, pressing the ball into the pit of his stomach like a person in excruciating anguish. On the swing back, he turned completely away from the batter, facing second base for a moment, at the same time poising himself on his right foot and pointing his left foot toward the zenith. Then he came forward and around, as if he would put the sphere over with the speed of a cannon ball—and handed up a little, slow bender.

81

But he need not have troubled himself to put a curve on that first one, for Fred Hallett, leading off for the Grays, stood quite still and stared like a person hypnotized. The ball floated over, and the umpire called a strike, which led Hallett to shake himself and join in the laughter of the crowd.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" spluttered Wiley. "Was my speed too much for you? Couldn't you see it when it came across? Shall I pitch you a slow one?"

Hallett shook his head, unable to reply.

"Oh, vurry, vurry well," said the Marine Marvel. "As you choose. I don't want to be too hard on you." Then, after going through with a startling variation of the former convulsions, he did pitch a ball that was so speedy that the batsman swung too slowly. And, a few minutes later, completing the performance to his own satisfaction, he struck Hallett out with a neat little drop. "I preen myself," said he, "that I'm still there with the huckleberries. As a pitcher of class, I've got Matty and a few others backed up against the ropes. Bring on your next victim."

82

Charlie Watson found the burlesque so amusing that he laughed all the way from the bench to the plate. The eccentric pitcher looked at him sympathetically.

"When you get through shedding tears," he said, "I'll pitch to you. I hate to see a strong man weep."

Then, without the slightest warning, using no wind-up whatever, he snapped one straight over, catching Watson unprepared. That sobered Watson down considerably.

"I'm glad to see you feeling better," declared the manager of the Wind Jammers. "Now that you're quite prepared, I'll give you something easy."

The slow one that he tossed up seemed to hang in the air with the stitches showing. Watson hit it and popped a little fly into Wiley's hands, the latter not being compelled to move out of his tracks. He removed his cap and bowed his thanks.

Doc Tremain walked out seriously enough, apparently not at all amused by the horseplay that was taking place. With his hands on his hips, Wiley stared hard at Tremain.

"Here's a jolly soul!" cried the pitcher. "He's simply laughing himself sick. I love to see a man enjoy himself so diabolically."

83

"Oh, play ball!" the doctor retorted tartly. "This crowd isn't here to see monkeyshines."

"Then they won't look at you, my happy friend. And that's a dart of subtle repartee."

Wiley's remarkable wind-up and delivery did not seem to bother Tremain, who viciously smashed the first ball pitched to him. It was a savage line drive slightly to the left of the slabman, but the latter shot out his gloved hand with the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake, and grabbed the whistling sphere. Having made the catch, the Marine Marvel tossed the ball carelessly to the ground and sauntered toward the bench with an air of bored lassitude. There was a ripple of applause.

"You got off easy that time, cap'n," said Locke, coming out. "When are you going to let us have a crack at Jones?"

"A crack at him!" retorted Wiley. "Don't make me titter, Lefty! Your assemblage of would-bes never could get anything remotely related to a crack off Jones. However, when ongwee begins to creep over me I'll let him go in and polish you off."

"Colonel" Rickey, leading off for the Wind Jammers in the second, hoisted an infield fly, and expressed his annoyance in a choice Southern drawl as he went back to the bench.

84

Peter Plum, the fat right fielder, followed, poling out an infield drive which, to the amazement of the crowd, he nearly turned into a safety by the most surprising dash to first. Impossible though it seemed, the chunky, short-legged fellow could run like a deer, and when he was cut down by little more than a yard at the hassock he vehemently protested that it was robbery.

Locke was taking it easy now; he almost seemed to invite a situation that would again put his arm to the test. There was a queer feeling in his shoulder, a feeling he did not like, and he wondered if he could "tighten" in repeated pinches, as he had so frequently done when facing the best batters in the business. But, though he grooved one to Schaeffer, the catcher boosted an easy fly to Watson in left field.

Wiley went through the second inning unharmed, although, with two down, Colby landed on the horsehide for two sacks. Coming next, Gates bit at a slow one and lifted a foul to the third baseman.

"Now give me my faithful bludgeon," cried the Marine Marvel, making for the bats. "Watch me start something! I'm going to lacerate the feelings of this man Lefty. I hate to do it, but I hear the clarion call of duty." 85

Locke decided to strike Wiley out. Wiley picked out a smoking shoot, and banged it on a line for one sack.

"Nice tidy little bingle, wasn't it, mate?" he cried. "I fancied mayhap Dame Rumor had slandered you, but alas! I fear me you are easy for a real batter with an eye."

Nuccio was up again, and he also hit safely, Wiley going to third on the drive. Locke's teeth clicked together. Was it possible that real batters could find him with such ease? If so, the Big League would see him no more; he would not return to it. If so, his days as a pitcher were surely ended. For a moment Bailey Weegman's grinning face again rose vaguely before him.

"I must know!" he muttered. "I must settle these infernal doubts that are torturing me."

CHAPTER X THE ONLY DOOR

86

Luther Bemis blundered. He had been given the signal to let Nuccio steal, but he hit at the ball and raised a foul to Colby, who stepped back upon first and completed a double play unassisted, the Italian having made a break for second. Nuccio was disgusted, and Cap'n Wiley made a few remarks to Bemis that caused the lengthy center fielder to retire to the bench in confusion.

"There has been a sudden addition to the bone crop," concluded the vexed manager of the Wind Jammers. "Beamy, in order to avoid getting your dates mixed, you should carry a telescope and take an occasional survey of the earth's surface."

"Niver mind, cap'n," called O'Reilley. "I'll put ye across whin I hit."

With a twinge of apprehension, Locke sought to trick the confident Irishman into biting at a curve. And, even as he pitched, he was annoyed with himself because apprehension prevented him from bending the ball over. O'Reilley stubbornly declined to bite. 87

There was a sudden chorus of warning shouts as Sommers returned the ball, and the pitcher was surprised to see Cap'n Wiley running for the registry station. The foxy old veteran was actually trying to steal home on the Big League pitcher. Laughing, Lefty waited for the ball, aware that Sommers was leaping into position to nail the runner. Without undue haste, yet without wasting a second, the slabman snapped the sphere back to the eager hands of the catcher, who poked it into the sliding man's ribs. Wiley was out by four feet, at least.

"Why didn't you wait for O'Reilley to hit?" Locke asked.

"I wanted to spare your already tattered nerves," was the instant answer. "You see, sympathy may be found elsewhere than in the dictionary."

Still floundering in the bog of doubt, Lefty was far from satisfied. He had told himself that he invited the test which would give him the answer he sought, yet he realized that, face to face with it, he had felt a shrinking, a qualm, akin to actual dread; and he was angry with himself because he drew a breath of relief when the blundering and reckless playing of the Wind Jammers postponed the ordeal, leaving him still groping in the dark. 88

Sommers led off with a hot grounder, which O'Reilley booted. Playing the game, Locke bunted, advancing Sommers and perishing himself at first.

"Cleverly done," admitted Cap'n Wiley, "but it will avail you naught. I shall now proceed to decorate the pill with the oil of elusion."

A friend called to Lefty in the crowd back of first, and the pitcher walked back to exchange a few words with him. He was turning away when a hand fell on his arm, and he looked round to find Weegman there. The man's face wore a supercilious and knowing smile.

"I didn't mean to attend this game," said Weegman, "but, having the time, I decided to watch part of it, as it would give me a good chance to settle a certain point definitely in my mind. What

I've seen has been quite enough. Your arm is gone, Locke, and you know it. You're laboring like a longshoreman against this bunch of bushers, and, working hard as you are, you couldn't hold them only for their dub playing. I admit that you struck out some of their weakest stickers, but you were forced to the limit to do it, and it made that injured wing of yours wilt. They had you going in the last round, and threw away their chance by bonehead playing."

"Weegman," said Locke, "I'm tired of hearing you talk. The sound of your voice makes me weary."

But instead of being disturbed the man chuckled. "The truth frequently is unpleasant," he returned; "and you know I am speaking the raw truth. Now I like you, Locke; I've always liked you, and I hate to see you go down and out for good. That's what it means if you don't accept my offer. As manager of the Blue Stockings, you can hold your job this season if you don't pitch a ball; it'll enable you to stay in the business in a new capacity, and you'll not be dependent on your arm. A pitcher's arm may fail him any time. As a manager, you may last indefinitely."

"It would be a crime if the sort of a manager you want lasted a month."

"If you don't come at my terms, you may kiss yourself good-by. The Feds are going to learn that your flinger is gone; be sure of that."

"That's a threat?"

"A warning. If their crazy offer has tempted you, put the temptation aside. That offer will be withdrawn. Every manager and magnate in the business is going to know that as a pitcher you have checked in. There's only one door for you to return by, and I'm holding it open." He laughed and placed his hand again ingratiatingly upon Locke's arm.

Locke shook it off instantly. "Were I as big a rascal as you, Weegman," he said, with limitless contempt, "I'd make a dash through that door. Thank Heaven, I'm not!"

The baffled man snapped his fingers. "You are using language you'll regret!" he harshly declared, although he maintained his smiling demeanor to such a degree that any one a few yards distant might have fancied the conversation between the two was of the pleasantest sort.

Lefty returned to the coaching line, taking the place of Tremain; for Wiley had issued a pass to Hallett, Watson was at bat, and the doctor followed Watson. Instantly sizing up the situation, the southpaw signaled for a double steal, and both runners started with the first movement of the pitcher's delivery. Schaeffer's throw to third was not good, and Sommers slid under. Hallett had no trouble about reaching second.

"What are you trying to pull off here?" cried the manager of the Wind Jammers. "Such behavior is most inconsiderate, or words to that effect. However it simply makes it necessary for me to inject a few more kinks into the horsehide."

Admittedly he did hand up some peculiar curves to Watson, but his control was so poor that none of the twisters came over and like Hallett, the left fielder walked. This peopled the corners.

"Here," said Wiley, still chipper and undisturbed, "is that jolly soul who obligingly batted an easy one into my fin the last time. I passed the last hitter in order to get at this kind party again."

Tremain let one pitch go by, but the next one pleased him, and he cracked the ball on the nose. It was a two-base drive, which enabled the runners already on to score. As the three raced over the plate, one after another, Wiley was seen violently wigwagging toward the bench. In response to his signal, Mysterious Jones rose promptly and prepared to warm up with the second catcher.

"I'm off to-day; perhaps I should say I'm awful," admitted the Marine Marvel. "A spazoozum like that is sufficient to open my eyes to the humiliating fact that I'm not pitching up to class. In a few minutes, however, you'll have an opportunity to see Mr. Jones uncork some of the real stuff."

Wiley dallied with the next batter for the purpose of giving the dummy pitcher time to shake the kinks out of his arm. Apparently Jones did not need much time in which to get ready, for when the sailor presently dealt out another pass the relief twirler signified his willingness to assume the burden.

As Jones walked out upon the diamond, Locke looked around vainly for Weegman. It was possible, of course, that Collier's private secretary had departed at once following his last rebuff, but somehow Lefty felt that he was still lingering and taking pains not to be seen by Mysterious Jones. Suddenly the southpaw felt a desire to bring the two men face to face, wondering what would happen. There was more than a possibility that such a meeting might present some dramatic features.

Turning back, Lefty's eyes followed Jones. The interest and fascination he had felt at first sight of the man returned, taking hold upon him powerfully and intensely. There was something in the solemn face of the mute that spoke of shattered hopes, deep and abiding sorrow, despair, tragedy. He was like one who stood aloof even while he mingled with mankind. Knowing other mutes, many of whom seemed happy and contented, Locke could not believe that the peculiarities of Mysterious Jones were wholly due to resentment against the affliction which fate had placed upon him. Behind it all there must lay a story with perhaps more than one dark page.

CHAPTER XI

BURNING SPEED

93

As a pitcher, Jones displayed no needless flourishes. His style of delivery was simple but effective. Into the swing of his long arm he put the throwing force of his fine shoulder and sinewy body. Wiley had exaggerated in boasting of the mute's speed; nevertheless that speed was something to marvel at. Norris, the clean-up man of the Grays, who preferred smokers to any other kind, was too slow in striking at the first two pitched to him by Jones. Norris looked astounded and incredulous, and the spectators gasped.

"That's his slow one, mates!" cried Wiley. "Pretty soon, when he gets loosened up, he'll let out a link or two and burn a few across. The daisies are growing above the only man he ever hit with the ball."

Although Norris was not slow in swinging at the next one, the sphere took a shoot that deceived him, and the mute had disposed of the first hitter with three pitched balls.

"And the wiseacres say there are no real heavens left in the bushes!" whooped Cap'n Wiley.

94

Locke was thrilled. Could it be that here was a discovery, a find, a treasure like a diamond in the rough, left around underfoot amid pebbles? The Big League scouts are the grubstakers, the prospectors, the treasure hunters of baseball; ceaselessly and tirelessly they scour the country even to the remote corners and out-of-the-way regions where the game nourishes in the crude, lured on constantly by the hope of making a big find. To them the unearthing of a ball player of real ability and promise is like striking the outcroppings of a Comstock or a Kimberly; and among the cheering surface leads that they discover, a hundred peter out into worthlessness, where one develops into a property of value. More and more the scouts complain that the ground has been raked over again and again and the prizes are growing fewer and farther between; yet every now and then, where least expected, one of them will turn up something rich that has been overlooked by journeying too far afield. The fancy that Mysterious Jones might be one of these unnoticed nuggets set Locke's pulses throbbing.

Jones had appeared to be a trifle slender in street clothes, but now Lefty could see that he was the possessor of fine muscles and whipcord sinews. There was no ounce of unnecessary flesh upon him anywhere; he was like an athlete trained to the minute and hardened for an enduring test by long and continuous work. There seemed little likelihood that protracted strain would expose a flaw. He had speed and stamina; if he possessed the required skill and brains, there was every reason to think that he might "deliver the goods." With the advent of the silent man upon the mound, Locke's attention became divided between doubts about himself and interest in the performance of the mute.

95

Hampton, who followed Norris, was quite as helpless against the dazzling speed of Jones; he could not even foul the ball. "Great smoke, Locke!" he exclaimed, pausing on his way to center field. "That man's a terror! He seems to groove them all, but you can't see them come over."

"Perhaps he can't keep it up," said Lefty.

"I hope not. If he does, we've got to win on the runs we've made already; there'll be no more scoring for us. It's up to you to hold them down."

The southpaw held them in the fourth, but he did so by working his head fully as much as his arm. By this time he had learned something of the hitting weaknesses of the Wind Jammers, and he played upon those weaknesses successfully. To his teammates and the spectators the performance was satisfactory; to him it proved only that his brain, if not his arm, was still in perfect condition.

96

Mysterious Jones came back with two strikeouts; in fact, he struck Sommers, the third man, out also; but the whistling, shooting sphere went through the catcher, and Sommers raced to first on the error. This brought Locke up, and he was eager to hit against Jones. He missed the first one cleanly, but fouled the next two, which was better than any one else had done. Then the silent man put something more on the ball, and Lefty failed to touch it.

"Nice little pitcher, don't you think?" inquired Cap'n Wiley blandly.

"He behaves well, very well," admitted the southpaw.

The Grays implored Locke to keep the enemy in hand; the crowd entreated him. This was the game they desired to win. To them it was a struggle of vital importance, and the winning or losing of it was the only question of moment. They did not dream of something a thousand times more momentous involving Lefty Locke.

Loyal to the team and its supporters, the southpaw could not take needless chances of losing, no matter how much he longed to be put upon his mettle and forced to the last notch. Therefore he continued to work his head while on the slab. Schaeffer fouled out, Jones fanned indifferently, and Nuccio popped to shortstop.

97

"Lucky boy!" called Wiley. "But things won't always break so well for you. You'll have to go your limit before the game is over."

"I hope so," said Lefty.

Hallett caught one of Jones' whistlers on the end of his bat and drove it straight into the hands of

the first baseman.

"Hooray!" laughed Watson. "At least that shows that he can be hit."

"A blind man might hit one in a million if he kept his bat swinging," scoffed Wiley. "Let's see you do as much."

Watson could not do as much; he fanned three times. Then Jones pitched four balls to Tremain, and the doctor placed himself in Watson's class.

The game had become a pitchers' battle, with one twirler cutting the batters down with burning speed and shoots, while the other held them in check through the knowledge he had swiftly acquired regarding their shortcomings with the stick. In every way the performance of Jones was the most spectacular, and in the crowd scores of persons were beginning to tell one another that the mute was the greater pitcher.

98

The truth was, experience in fast company had taught Lefty Locke to conserve his energies; like Mathewson, he believed that the eight players who supported him should shoulder a share of the defensive work, and it was not his practice to "put everything on the ball," with the cushions clean. Only when pinches came did he tighten and burn them across. Nor was he in that class of pitchers who are continually getting themselves into holes by warping them wide to lure batters into reaching; for he had found that a twirler who followed such a method would be forced to go the limit by cool and heady batters who made a practice of "waiting it out." Having that prime requisite of all first-class moundmen, splendid control, he sought out an opponent's weakest spot and kept the ball there, compelling the man to strike at the kind from which he was least likely to secure effective drives. This had led a large number of the fans who fancied themselves wise to hold fast to their often-expressed belief that the southpaw was lucky, but they were always looking for the opposition to fall on him and hammer him all over the lot.

Therefore it was not strange that the crowd, assembled to watch the game in Fernandon, should soon come to regard the mute, with his blinding speed and jagged shoots, as the superior slabman. Apparently without striving for effect, Jones was a spectacular performer; mechanical skill and superabundant energy were his to the limit. But Locke knew that something more was needed for a man to make good in the Big League. Nevertheless, with such a foundation to build upon, unless the fellow should be flawed by some overshadowing natural weakness that made him impossible, coaching, training, and experience were the rungs of the ladder by which he might mount close to the top.

99

Loyal to the core, Lefty was thinking of the pitching staff of the Blue Stockings, weakened by deflections to the Federals, possibly by his own inability to return. For a little time, even Weegman was forgotten. Anyway, the southpaw had not yet come to regard it as a settled thing that Bailey Weegman would be permitted to undermine and destroy the great organization, if such was his culpable design; in some manner the scoundrel would be blocked and baffled.

The sixth inning saw no break in the run of the game between the Grays and the Wind Jammers. Bemis, O'Reilley, and Schepps all hit Locke, but none hit safely, while Jones slaughtered three of the locals by the strike-out method. As Wiley had stated was the silent man's custom, he seemed to be seeking revenge on the world for giving him a raw deal.

100

When Oleson began the seventh with a weak grounder and "got a life" through an error, Lefty actually felt a throb of satisfaction, for it seemed that the test might be forced upon him at last. But the Swede attempted to steal on the first pitch to Rickey, and Sommers threw him out. Rickey then lifted a high fly just back of first base, and Colby put him out of his misery. Plum batted an easy one to second.

"There's only one thing for me to do," thought Locke. "I've got to work the strike-out stuff in the next two innings, just as if men were on bases, and see if I've got it. The game will be over if I wait any longer for a real pinch."

When Jones had polished off Gates and Sommers, Locke stepped out to face the mute the second time. Having watched the man and analyzed his performance, the southpaw felt that he should be able to obtain a hit. "If I can't lay the club against that ball," he told himself, "then that fellow's putting something on it beside speed and curves; he's using brains also."

Cap'n Wiley jumped up from the bench and did a sailor's hornpipe. "This is the life!" he cried. "The real thing against the real thing! Take soundings, Lefty; you're running on shoals. You'll be high and dry in a minute."

101

Straight and silent, Jones stood and looked at the Big League player, both hands holding the ball hidden before him. Wiley ceased his dancing and shouting and a hush settled on the crowd. To Locke it seemed that the eyes of the voiceless pitcher were plumbing the depths of his mind and searching out his hidden thoughts; there came to Lefty a ridiculous fancy that by some telepathic method the man on the slab could fathom his purposes and so make ready to defeat them. An uncanny feeling crept upon him, and he was annoyed. Jones pitched, and the batsman missed a marvelous drop, which he had not been expecting.

"Perhaps I'll have to revise my theory about him not using brains," was the southpaw's mental admission.

The next two pitches were both a trifle wide, and Lefty declined to bite at either. For the first time, as if he knew that here was a test, Jones appeared to be trying to "work" the batter. Locke fouled the following one.

"That's all there is to it," declared Wiley, "and I'm excruciatingly surprised that there should be even that much. Go 'way back, Mr. Locke!"

Again Jones surveyed Lefty with his piercing eyes, and for the third time he pitched a shoot that was not quite across. As if he had known it would not be over, the batsman made not even the slightest move to swing.

"Some guessing match!" confessed the Marine Marvel. "Now, however, let me give you my plighted word of dishonor that you're going to behold a specimen of the superfluous speed Jonesy keeps on tap for special occasions. Hold your breath and see if you can see it go by."

The ball did not go by; Lefty hit it fairly and sent a safety humming to right.

CHAPTER XII

TOO MUCH TEMPTATION

"Is it poss-i-bill!" gasped Cap'n Wiley, staggering and clutching at his forehead. "I am menaced by a swoon! Water! Whisky! I'll accept anything to revive me!"

Fred Hallett hurried to the pan with his bat. "It's my turn now," he said. "We've started on him, and we should all hit him."

Locke signalled that he would steal, and Hallett let the first one pass. Lefty went down the line like a streak, but Schaeffer made a throw that forced him to hit the dirt and make a hook slide. He caught his spikes in the bag and gave his ankle a twist that sent a pain shooting up his leg.

"Safe!" declared the umpire.

Locke did not get up. The crowd saw him drag himself to the bag and sit on it, rubbing his ankle. Schepps bent over him solicitously.

"Dat was a nice little crack, pal," said the sandlotter, "and a nifty steal. Hope youse ain't hoited."

But Lefty had sprained his ankle so seriously that he required assistance to walk from the field. A runner was put in his place, although Wiley informed them that they need not take the trouble. And Wiley was right, for Jones struck Hallett out.

It was impossible for Locke to continue pitching, so Matthews took his place. And the southpaw was left still uncertain and doubtful; the game had not provided the test he courted. Weegman apparently had departed; there was no question in the mind of Charles Collier's representative, and, angered by the rebuff he had encountered, he was pretty certain to spread the report that the great southpaw was "all in." He had practically threatened to do this when he declared that every manager and magnate in the business would soon know that Locke's pitching days were over.

The Wind Jammers, spurred on by Cap'n Wiley, went after Matthews aggressively, and for a time it appeared certain that they were going to worry him off his feet. With only one down, they pushed a runner across in the eighth, and there were two men on the sacks when a double play blighted their prospect of tying up, perhaps of taking the lead, at once.

As Jones continued invulnerable in the last of the eighth, the visitors made their final assault upon Matthews in the ninth. But fortune was against them. The game ended with Wiley greatly disappointed, though still cheerful.

"A little frost crept into my elbow in the far-away regions of the North," he admitted. "I'll shake it out in time. If I'd started old Jonesy against Lefty, there would have been a different tale to tell."

The Wind Jammers were booked to play in Jacksonville the following afternoon, but they remained in Fernandon overnight. Seated on the veranda of the Magnolia, Wiley was enjoying a cigar after the evening meal, and romancing, as usual, when Locke appeared, limping, with the aid of a cane.

"It grieves me to behold your sorry plight," said the Marine Marvel sympathetically. "I cajole with you most deprecatingly. But why, if you were going to get hurt at all, weren't you obliging enough to do it somewhat earlier in the pastime? That would have given my faithful henchmen a chance to put the game away on ice."

"You can't be sure about that," returned Lefty. "You collected no more scores off Matthews than you did off me."

"But you passed us six nice, ripe goose eggs, while he dealt out only one. There was a difference that could be distinguished with the unclothed optic. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Jones had something on you; while he officiated, you were the only person who did any gamboling on the cushions, and what you did didn't infect the result. What do you think of Jones?"

"Will you lend me your ear while I express my opinion privately?"

"With the utmost perspicacity," said Wiley, rising. "Within my boudoir—excuse my fluid French—I'll uncork either ear you prefer and let you pour it full to overflowing."

In the privacy of Wiley's room, without beating around the bush, Locke stated that he believed

Jones promising material for the Big League, and that he wished to size up the man.

"While I have no scouting commission or authority," said Lefty, "if Kennedy should manage the Blue Stockings this season, he'd stand by my judgment. The team must have pitchers. Of course, some will be bought in the regular manner, but I know that, on my advice, Kennedy would take Jones on and give him a show to make good, just as he gave me a chance when I was a busher. I did not climb up by way of the minors; I made one clean jump from the back pastures into the Big League."

"Mate," said Wiley, "let me tell you something a trifle bazaar: Jones hasn't the remotest ambition in the world to become a baseball pitcher."

Locke stared at him incredulously. The swarthy little man was serious—at least, as serious as he could be. 107

"Then," asked the southpaw, "why is he pitching?"

"Tell *me!* I've done a little prognosticating over that question."

"You say he does not talk about himself. How do you—"

"Let me elucidate, if I can. I told you I ran across Jones in Alaska. I saw him pitch in a baseball match in Nome. How he came to ingratiate himself into that contest I am unable to state. Nobody seemed able to tell me. All I found out about him was that he was one of three partners who had a valuable property somewhere up in the Jade Mountain region—not a prospect, but a real, bony-fido mine. Already they had received offers for the property, and any day they could sell out for a sum salubrious enough to make them all scandalously wealthy. They had entered into some sort of an agreement that bound them all to hold on until two of the three should vote to sell; Jones was tied up under this contraction.

"I had grown weary of the vain search for the root of all evil. For me that root has always been more slippery than a squirming eel; every time I thought I had it by the tail it would wriggle out of my eager clutch and get away. I longed for the fleshpots of my own native heath. Watching that ball game in Nome, my blood churned in my veins until it nearly turned to butter. Once more, in my well-fertilized fancy, I saw myself towering the country with my Wind Jammers; and, could I secure Jonesy for my star flinger, I knew I would be able to make my return engagement a scintillating and scandalous success. With him for a nucleus, I felt confident that I could assemble together a bunch of world beaters. I resolved to go after Jones. I went, without dalliance. I got him corralled in a private room and locked the door on him. 108

"Mate, I am a plain and simple soul, given not a jot or tittle to exaggeration, yet I am ready to affirm—I never swear; it's profane—that I had the tussle of my life with Jones. Parenthetically speaking, we wrestled all over that room for about five solid hours. I had supplied myself with forty reams of writing paper, a bushel basket full of lead pencils, and two dictionaries. When I finally subdued Jones, I was using a stub of the last pencil in the basket, was on the concluding sheet of paper, had contracted writer's cramp, and the dictionaries were mere torn and tattered wrecks. In the course of that argument, I am certain I wrote every word in the English language, besides coining a few thousand of my own. I had practically exhausted every form of persuasion, and was on the verge of lying down and taking the count. Then, by the rarest chance, I hit upon the right thing. I wrote a paregoric upon the joys of traveling around over the United States from city to city, from town to town, of visiting every place of importance in the whole broad land, of meeting practically every living human being in the country who was alive and deserved to be met. Somehow that got him; I don't know why, but it did. I saw his eyes gleam and his somber face change as he read that last wild stab of mine. It struck home; he agreed to go. I had conquered. 109

"Now, mark ye well, the amount of his salary had not a whit to do with it, and he entertained absolutely no ambish to become a baseball pitcher. He was compelled to leave his partners up there running the mine, and to rely upon their honesty to give him a square deal. You have been told how he promulgates around over every new place he visits and stares strangers out of countenance. Whether or not he's otherwise wrong in his garret, he's certainly 'off' on that stunt. That's how I'm able to keep him on the parole of this club of mine."

"In short, he's a sort of monomaniac?"

"Perhaps that's it."

Lefty did a bit of thinking. "You've been touring the smaller cities and the towns in which an independent ball team would be most likely to draw. In the large cities of a Big League circuit there are thousands upon thousands of persons Jones has never met. He could work a whole season in such a circuit and continue to see hosts of strangers every time he visited any one of the cities included. Under such circumstances he would have the same incentive that he has now. If he can be induced to make the change, I'll take a chance on him, and I'll see that you are well paid to use your persuasive powers to lead him to accept my proposition." 110

"But you stated that you had no legal authority to make such a deal."

"I haven't; but I am willing to take a chance, with the understanding that the matter is to be kept quiet until I shall be able to put through an arrangement that will make it impossible for any manager in organized ball to steal him away."

Wiley shook his head. "I couldn't get along without him, Lefty; he's the mainsheet of the Wind Jammers. It would be like chucking the sextant and the compass overboard. We'd be adrift

without any instrument to give us our position or anything to lay a course by.”

“If you don’t sell him to me, some manager is going to take him from you without handing you as much as a lonesome dollar in return. You can’t dodge the Big League scouts; it’s a wonder you’ve dodged them as long as you have. They’re bound to spot Jones and gobble him up. Do you prefer to sell him or to have him snatched?”

“What will you give for him?”

“Now you’re talking business. If I can put through the deal I’m figuring on, I’ll give you five hundred dollars, which, considering the conditions, is more than a generous price.”

“Five hundred dollars! Is there that much money to be found in one lump anywhere in the world?”

“I own some Blue Stockings stock, so you see I have a financial, as well as a sentimental, interest in the club. I’m going to fight hard to prevent it from being wrecked. As long as it can stay in the first division it will continue to be a money-maker, but already the impression has become current that the team is riddled, and the stock has slumped. There are evil forces at work. I don’t know the exact purpose these forces are aiming at, but I’m a pretty good guesser. The property is mighty valuable for some people to get hold of if they can get it cheap enough.”

“They’re even saying that you’re extremely to the bad. What do you think about it yourself, Lefty?”

Locke flushed. “Time will answer that.”

“You look like a fighter,” said Wiley. “I wish you luck.”

“But what do you say to my proposition? Give me a flat answer.”

“Five hundred dollars!” murmured the Marine Marvel, licking his lips. “I’m wabbling on the top rail of the fence.”

“Fall one way or the other.”

Heaving a sigh, the sailor rose to his feet, and gave his trousers a hitch. “Let’s interview Jones,” he proposed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PERPLEXING QUESTION

The following morning Lefty Locke received two letters. One was from the Federal League headquarters in Chicago, urging him to accept the offer of the manager who had made such a tempting proposal to him. The position, it stated, was still his for the taking, and he was pressed to wire agreement to the terms proposed.

The other letter was from Locke’s father, a clergyman residing in a small New Jersey town. The contents proved disturbing. The Reverend Mr. Hazelton’s savings of a lifetime had been invested in a building and loan association, and the association had failed disastrously. Practically everything the clergyman possessed in the world would be swept away; it seemed likely that he would lose his home.

Lefty’s face grew pale and grim as he read this letter. He went directly to his wife and told her. Janet was distressed.

“What can be done?” she cried. “You must do something, Lefty! Your father and mother, at their age, turned out of their home! It is terrible! What can you do?”

Locke considered a moment. “If I had not invested the savings of my baseball career in Blue Stockings stock,” he said regretfully, “I’d have enough now to save their home for them.”

“But can’t you sell the stock?”

“Yes, for half what I paid for it—perhaps. That wouldn’t be enough. You’re right in saying I must do something, but what can I—” He stopped, staring at the other letter. He sat down, still staring at it, and Janet came and put her arm about him.

“Here’s something!” he exclaimed suddenly.

“What, dear?”

“This letter from Federal League headquarters, urging me to grab the offer the Feds have made me. Twenty-seven thousand dollars for three years, a certified check for the first year’s salary, and a thousand dollars bonus. That means that I can get ten thousand right in my hand by signing a Federal contract—more than enough to save my folks.”

Janet’s face beamed, and she clapped her hands. “I had forgotten about their offer! Why, you’re all right! It’s just the thing.”

“I wonder?”

She looked at him, and grew sober. “Oh, you don’t want to go to the Federals? You’re afraid they

won't last?"

"It isn't that."

"No?"

"No, girl. If there was nothing else to restrain me, I'd take the next train for Chicago, and put my fist to a Fed contract just as soon as I could. I need ten thousand dollars now, and need it more than I ever before needed money."

Janet ran her fingers through his hair, bending forward to scan his serious and perplexed face. She could see that he was fighting a battle silently, grimly. She longed to aid him in solving the problem by which he was confronted, but realizing that she could not quite put herself in his place, and that, therefore, her advice might not come from the height of wisdom and experience, she held herself in check. Should he ask counsel of her she would give the best she could.

"I know," she said, after a little period of silence, "that you must think of your financial interest in the Blue Stockings."

"I'm not spending a moment's thought on that now. I'm thinking of old Jack Kennedy and Charles Collier; of Bailey Weegman and his treachery, for I believe he is treacherous to the core. I'm thinking also of something else I don't like to think about."

"Tell me," she urged.

He looked up at her, and smiled wryly. Then he felt of his left shoulder. "It's this," he said.

She caught her breath. "But you said you were going to give your arm the real test yesterday. The Grays won, and the score was three to one when you hurt your ankle and were forced to quit. I thought you were satisfied."

"I very much doubt if the Grays would have won had not Cap'n Wiley insisted upon pitching the opening innings for his team. The man who followed him did not permit us to score at all. I was the only one who got a safe hit off him. The test was not satisfactory, Janet."

Her face grew white. It was not like Lefty to lack confidence in himself. During the past months, although his injured arm had seemed to improve with disheartening slowness, he had insisted that it would come round all right before the season opened. Yet lately he had not appeared quite so optimistic. And now, after the game which was to settle his doubts, he seemed more doubtful than before. She believed that he was holding something back, that he was losing heart, but as long as there was any hope remaining he would try not to burden her with his worries.

Suddenly she clutched his shoulders with her slender hands. "It's all wrong!" she cried. "You've given up the best that was in you for the Blue Stockings. You've done the work of two pitchers. They won't let you go now. Even if your arm is bad at the beginning of the season, they'll keep you on and give you a chance to get it back into condition."

"Old Jack Kennedy would, but I have my doubts about any other manager."

"You don't mean that they'd let you go outright, just drop you?"

"Oh, it's possible they'd try to sell me or trade me. If they could work me off on to some one who wasn't wise, probably they'd do it. That's not reckoning on Weegman. He's so sore and vindictive that he may spread the report that I've pitched my wing off. I fancy he wouldn't care a rap if that did lose Collier the selling price that could be got for me."

"Oh, I just hate to hear you talk about being traded or sold! It doesn't sound as if you were a human being and this a free country. Cattle are traded and sold."

"Cattle and ball players."

"It's wrong! Isn't there any way--"

"The Federals are showing the way."

"Your sympathy's with them. You're not bound to the Blue Stockings; you're still your own free agent."

"Under the circumstances what would you have me do?"

At last he had asked her advice. Now she could speak. She did so eagerly.

"Accept the offer the Federals have made you."

"My dear," he said, "would you have me do that, with my own mind in doubt as to whether or not I was worth a dollar to them? Would you have me take the ten thousand I could get, knowing all the time that they might be paying it for a has-been who wasn't worth ten cents? Would that be honest?"

"You can be honest, then," she hurriedly declared. "No one knows for a certainty, not even yourself, that you can't come back to your old form. You can go to the manager and tell him the truth about yourself. Can't you do that?"

"And then what? Probably he wouldn't want me after that at any price."

"You can make a fair bargain with him. You can have it put in the contract that you are to get that money if you do come back and make good as a pitcher."

Lefty laughed. "I think it would be the first time on record that a ball player ever went to a

manager who was eager to sign him up, and made such a proposition. It would be honest, Janet; but if the manager believed me, if he saw I was serious, do you fancy he'd feel like coming across with the first year's salary in advance and the bonus? You see I can't raise the money I need, and be honest."

She wrung her hands and came back to the first question that had leaped from her lips: "What can you do?"

"I don't think I'll make any decisive move until I find out what sort of queer business is going on in the Blue Stockings camp. I could get money through Kennedy if he were coming back. Everything is up in the air."

"How can you find out, away down here? You're too far away from the places where things are doing."

"I've been looking for a telegram from old Jack, an answer to mine. I feel confident I'll get a wire from him as soon as he reads my letter. Meanwhile I'll write to my parents and try to cheer them up. It's bound to take a little time to settle up the affairs of that building and loan association. Time is what I need now."

That very day Locke received a telegram from Jack Kennedy:

Meet me at the Grand, Indianapolis, the twenty-third. Don't fail.

A train carried Lefty north that night.

CHAPTER XIV ONLY ONE WAY

The registry clerk stated that no Mr. Kennedy was stopping at the Grand Hotel. Locke was disappointed, for he had expected old Jack would be waiting for him. However, the veteran manager would, doubtless, appear later. Lefty registered, and the clerk tossed a room key to the boy who was waiting with the southpaw's traveling bag.

As the pitcher turned from the desk he found himself face to face with a man whom he had seen on the train. The man, Locke believed, had come aboard at Louisville. There was something familiar about the appearance of the stranger, yet Lefty had not been able to place him. He had narrow hips, a rather small waist, fine chest development, and splendid shoulders; his neck was broad and swelling at the base; his head, with the hair clipped close, was round as a bullet; his nose had been broken, and there was an ugly scar upon his right cheek. He did not look to be at all fat, and yet he must have weighed close to one hundred and ninety. His hands, clenched, would have resembled miniature battering-rams.

This person had not taken a look at the register, yet he addressed the pitcher by name.

"How are you, Locke?" he said, with a grin that was half a sneer, half a menace. "I guessed you'd bring up here."

Lefty knew Mit Skullen the moment he spoke. One-time prize fighter and ball player, Skullen now posed as a scout employed by the Rockets; more often he acted as the henchman and bodyguard of Tom Garrity, owner of the team, and the best-hated man in the business. Garrity had so many enemies that he could not keep track of them; a dozen men had tried to "get" him at different times, and twice he had been assaulted and beaten up. Skullen had saved him from injury on other occasions.

Garrity was the most sinister figure in organized baseball. Once a newspaper reporter, he had somehow obtained control of the Rockets by chicanery and fraud. Sympathy and gratitude were sentiments unknown to him. He would work a winning pitcher to death, and then send the man shooting down to the minors the moment he showed the slightest symptom of weakness. He scoffed at regulations and bylaws; he defied restraint and control; he was in a constant wrangle with other owners and managers; and as a creator of discord and dissension he held the belt. And he snapped his fingers in the face of the national commission. The league longed to get rid of him, but could not seem to find any method of doing so.

"Been lookin' 'em over a little down South," explained Skullen superfluously. "Not much doin' this season, but I spotted one pitcher with a rovin' bunch o' freaks who had more smoke and kinks than you ever showed before you broke your arm, old boy. And he won't cost a cent when we get ready to grab him. Nobody's wise to him but me, either. S'pose you've come on to meet Weegman, hey?"

"Where'd you run across this find?" asked Locke casually, endeavoring not to appear curious.

Skullen pulled down one corner of his mouth, and winked. "T'ink I'll tell youse, old boy. But then Texas is a big bunch o' the map."

Texas! The Wind Jammers had come to Florida from Galveston.

"Did you have a talk with this unknown wizard?" questioned Lefty.

"He didn't talk much," returned the scout. "Oh, you can't pump me! I know your old Blue Stocks

ain't got a pitcher left that's worth a hoot in Halifax, or hardly a player, for that matter; but I ain't goin' to help you out—you an' Weegman. You gotter get together an' do your own diggin'."

"Weegman is in Indianapolis?"

"As if you didn't know! Never had no use for that guy; but, all the same, I advise you to grab on with him. It's your only chanct for a baseball job; everybody in the game's wise that you'll never do no more hurlin'."

Boiling inwardly, Locke permitted himself to be conducted to the elevator. While he was bathing he thought, with increasing wrath and dismay, of the insolent words of Skullen. The question that perplexed him most was how the bruiser knew anything of Weegman's business, especially the attempt to sign Locke as a manager. And Weegman was in Indianapolis!

Coming down, Lefty went again to the desk to inquire about Kennedy. He was handed a telegram. Tearing it open, he saw that it was from the Federal manager who had offered him a three years' contract. It stated curtly that the offer was withdrawn. Skullen was right; the story had gone forth that the star southpaw of the Blue Stockings would do no more pitching. Weegman was getting in his fine work.

Lefty felt a hand grip his elbow.

"Locke!" A well-dressed, youngish man grasped his hand and shook it. It was Franklin Parlme, who, for a long time, had evinced deep interest in Virginia Collier. Parlme, with family behind him, and a moderate income, had shown a distaste for business and a disposition to live the life of an idler. Collier had refused to countenance his daughter's marriage to Parlme until the latter should get into some worthy and remunerative employment, and make good. For two years Parlme had been hustling, and he had developed into a really successful automobile salesman.

"By Jove!" said Parlme. "I didn't expect to run across you here, old man. I'm mighty glad to see you. Perhaps you can tell me something about Virginia. What has Mrs. Hazelton heard from her?"

The man seemed worried and nervous, and his question surprised Lefty.

"If any one should know about Miss Collier, you are the person," returned the pitcher. "Janet has scarcely heard from her since she sailed with her father. We supposed you were corresponding with her regularly."

Parlme drew him toward a leather-covered settee. "I'm pegged out," he admitted, and he looked it. "Business forced me to run on or I'd not be here now. I'm going back to New York to-night. Do you know, I've received only two letters from Virginia since she reached the other side, one from London, the other from Eaux Chaudes, in France. The latter was posted more than a month ago. It stated that Virginia and her father were leaving Eaux Chaudes for Italy. Since then no letters have come from her."

"Do you mean to say you haven't an idea where Miss Collier and her father are at the present time?"

Parlme lighted a cigarette. His hands were not steady. "I haven't an idea where Charles Collier is. As for Virginia, she cabled me that she was sailing on the *Victoria*, which reached New York four days ago. I was at the pier to meet her, but she didn't arrive, and her name was not on the passenger list."

Lefty uttered an exclamation. "That was strange!"

The other man turned on the settee to face him. "The whole thing has been queer. I had practically overcome Mr. Collier's prejudice and won his entire approval. Then he broke down; his health went to the bad, and his manner toward me seemed to change. I had an idea he went abroad more to take Virginia away than for any other reason. Anyway, I knew there was something wrong, and the two letters I got from her added to that conviction. Her father was trying to get her to break with me! There was another man whom he preferred."

"Another!"

"Yes, Bailey Weegman."

Locke gave a great start, as if he had received an electric thrust. "Weegman!" he cried guardedly. "That scoundrel! Collier is crazy, Parlme!"

"Now you've said something! I believe the man's mind is affected. Business reverses may have done it."

"Do you know that he left his baseball interests practically in the control of Weegman?"

"No; but it doesn't surprise me. In some way, that scoundrel has got a hold on him. Weegman has tried hard to undermine me with Virginia. I've always disliked him and his detestable laugh. Who is he, anyway? Where did he come from, and what are his antecedents?"

"You'll have to ask somebody else."

"It's Virginia I'm worrying about now," said Parlme, tossing aside his half-smoked cigarette.

"But if she was contemplating sailing for the United States with her father—"

"Her cablegram to me didn't mention her father. I got the impression that she was sailing alone."

"Alone! Great Scott!"

"And she didn't sail! Where is she? What happened to her? Do you wonder I'm rattled? I've made arrangements so that I can have a month, if necessary, to dig into this business. If that isn't enough, I'll take all the time needed. It's the deuce to pay, Locke, as sure as you're a foot high."

"In more ways than one," agreed Lefty. "I could tell you some other things, but you've got enough to worry about. We must arrange to keep in touch with each other. I presume I'll go back to Fernandon when I get through here."

"Here's my New York address," said Parlmees, handing over his card, and rising.

Five minutes after they separated old Jack Kennedy arrived, dusty and weary from his railroad journey. His shoulders were a trifle stooped, and he looked older by years, but his keen eyes lighted with a twinkle as he grasped Locke's hand.

"I knew you'd beat me to it, Lefty," he said. "Wouldn't have called on you to make the jaunt, but I had to chin with you face to face. Let's talk first and feed our faces afterward."

The veteran registered, and they took the elevator. Carrying Kennedy's traveling bag, a boy conducted them. A bar boy, bearing a tray that was decorated with drinks, was knocking on a door. Within the room somebody called for him to enter, and he did so as Locke was passing at old Jack's heels. By chance Lefty obtained a glimpse of the interior of that room before the door closed behind the boy. Two men, smoking cigars, were sitting at opposite sides of a table on which were empty glasses. They were Mit Skullen and Bailey Weegman.

Left together in Kennedy's room, Locke told the old manager what he had seen, and immediately Kennedy's face was twisted into a wrathful pucker.

"You're sure?"

"Dead sure," replied Locke.

"Well, it sorter confirms a little suspicion that's been creepin' inter my noddle. The Blue Stockings are up against somethin' more'n the Feds, and the Feds have chewed the team to pieces. Within the last three days they've nailed Temple, Dayly, and Hyland. There's only the remnants of a ball club left."

Locke was aghast. "Gene Temple, too!" he cried. "The boy I found! I thought he would stick."

"Money gets the best of 'em. Why shouldn't it, when them lads ought to have been tied up before this with Blue Stockings contracts? The bars have been left down for the Feds, and they've raided the preserves. Seems just like they've been invited to come in and help themselves. Why not, with a team without a manager, and everything left at loose ends? Never heard of such criminal folly! But mebbe it ain't folly; mebbe it's plain cadougerly. I've had an idea there was somethin' crooked behind it, but couldn't just quite nose it out. Now, with Weegman and Mit Skullen gettin' together private, I see a light. Garrity's the man! You know how he got his dirty paws on the Rockets. Well, if he ain't workin' to gobble the Blue Stockings I'll eat my hat! I'll bet that right now Tom Garrity's gathered in all the loose stock of the club that he could buy, and he's countin' on havin' enough to give him control before the season opens. He saw his chance, with the Feds reachin' for every decent player they could lay their hands on, and he went for it. What if the Blue Stockings do have a busted team this season? In three years the club might be built up again, and it's a sure money-maker just as long as it can keep in the first division. Lynchin' is what a crook like Garrity deserves!"

Kennedy's eyes were flashing, and he was literally quivering with wrath. Despite the fact that he was tired, he strode up and down the room.

"Weegman must be Garrity's tool, the creature who is helping him do the dirty work," said Locke.

"You've got his number! How he came to pick you for a mark, I don't know, unless it was because he thought you let me work you to death, havin' no mind of your own. He knew he couldn't put anythin' over with me, and so he decided to get rid of me; but he had to have somebody for a manager who would appear to be all right. He's got to be blocked. There's only one way."

"How?"

"You'll have to accept, and sign a contract to manage the team."

Lefty gasped. "But," he said, "I can't do that! You—"

"I'm out. He wouldn't have me, even if I'd do the work for no salary."

"But I can't agree to Weegman's terms. I couldn't do anything of my own accord; I couldn't sign a player unless he agreed. He made that plain."

"But he wouldn't dare put anything like that in the contract. It would be too barefaced. The minute you have the authority you can get to work savin' the remnants of the team by signin' up the players the Feds haven't grabbed already. I have a line on a few good youngsters who went back to the minors last year because there wasn't room for them. Put proof of Weegman's treachery before Collier, and Weegman's done for! It's the one play that's got to be made in this here pinch."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" called Kennedy.

Bailey Weegman entered, smiling.

CHAPTER XV

SIGNING THE MANAGER

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Weegman came in boldly. His manner was ingratiating, yet somewhat insolent, and he chuckled as he saw the look of surprise on the face of Lefty Locke. "Well, well!" he said. "Here we are! This is first rate. Now we can get together and do things."

To the southpaw's increasing astonishment, Kennedy stepped forward quickly, seized Weegman's hand, and shook it cordially and heartily.

"I wired for Locke," said the old manager. "I felt sure I could talk sense into his head. Didn't like to see him make a fool of himself and let a great opportunity slip through his fingers just because of a false notion about loyalty to me. But I didn't expect you before to-morrow."

Lefty was a trifle bewildered. Kennedy had known Weegman was coming to Indianapolis; in fact, had arranged to meet him there. Collier's representative beamed on Locke.

"Sorry I couldn't wait to see the finish of that game in Fernandon," he said; "but I saw enough to satisfy me. You did well to beat the Wind Jammers with that bunch of half invalids behind you, and your own arm all to the bad. Still, Wiley sort of handed you the game."

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"The score was three to two," reminded Lefty.

"The Wind Jammers couldn't hit. They were a lot of freaks, a burlesque baseball team." Weegman turned again to old Jack. "If you can talk some sense into Locke, you'll succeed where I failed. I wasted time, money, and breath on him; gave him up then. Let me tell you a joke." He began to laugh, and the southpaw writhed inwardly. "Who do you think wants to manage the Blue Stockings? You can't guess? Well, it's Skullen; yes, Mit Skullen. Actually came after the job. Got me cornered and gave me a great game of talk, trying to convince me that he could fill the bill. I was listening to his spiel when I caught a glimpse of you two passing the door of my room. Called the desk and asked the number of your room. Then I shook old Mit and came around. The idea of Mit Skullen managing a Big League club! Isn't that funny?" His whole body shook with merriment as he spoke.

Kennedy seemed to be amused also, and joined in Weegman's laughter. "Wonder what Tom Garrity would say to that? Skullen must have forgotten his old nemesis, John Barleycorn. It was John that put him down and out as a prize fighter and a ball player."

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"He says he hasn't looked at the stuff for four months. You should have heard him trying to convince me that he had the makings of a great manager."

Lefty knew Weegman was lying regarding the nature of the private consultation that had been held in a nearby room. But Kennedy seemed to be unaware of this.

"You wouldn't take Skullen under any conditions, would you?" asked old Jack.

"I wouldn't have him if he was ready to pay to manage the team. Collier would lift my scalp if I fell for anything like that. But I've got a line on a good man if-if-" He faltered, and looked at Locke, smiling.

"We'll settle that right here," declared Kennedy, with a growl. "Locke's the lad. I haven't had time to talk to him much, but I was telling him before you came in that he'd have to accept. As for me, a Class AA team ain't so worse. You're dead sure I can hook up with St. Paul?"

"I wired you about the proposition from Byers. He wants you, but he wasn't going to try to cut in on us. Did you send him word?"

"Not yet. Decided to have my talk with Lefty first."

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"I've always liked you, Kennedy," said Weegman. "You've been a great man in your day. You're a good man now, but it needs younger blood, especially in this fight against the Feds, confound them! About so often a team needs to change managers, especially when it begins to slip. The Blue Stockings began to slip last year, and the Feds have given us a push. Locke's young, and he's got the energy to build the team up. Working together, we can put it on its feet again. He'll have the very best counsel and advice. He's a favorite with the fans, and he'll be tolerated where you would be blamed. He'll come through and win out. Of that I am certain. The Feds will blow before the season's over, and the woods will be full of first-class players begging for jobs. Next season should see the Stockings stronger than ever, and the man who's managing the team's bound to be popular. He'll get a lot of credit."

Lefty had taken a chair. He opened his lips to speak, but stopped when he caught a warning sign from old Jack behind Weegman's shoulder.

"Is that contract ready for the boy?" asked Kennedy.

"I've got it in my pocket."

"Then nail him right now. Push it at him, and we'll make him sign. Don't let him get away."

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Weegman produced the document. Then, for a moment, he seemed to hesitate, flashing old Jack a look and giving Locke a hard stare.

"You understand the conditions?" he said, addressing the latter.

"Yes," answered Lefty, "you made them plain enough for a child to understand when you talked to me in Fernandon."

"Course he understands," cut in Kennedy. "He told me, and I told him to grab on without makin' no further talk. Just as you say, Weegman, with proper advice he can swing the thing. It looks pretty big to him, and he's doubtful. Let him look at that paper."

He took it from Weegman's hand and looked it over himself. It was practically the same sort of an agreement old Jack had signed himself when he took control of the team, and the name of Charles Collier, properly witnessed, had already been affixed to it. With the contract in his possession, along with Collier's power of attorney, Weegman could sign up any one he chose to manage the Blue Stockings. For a fleeting instant Kennedy's face was twisted into an expression of rage, which, however, Collier's private secretary did not catch.

Locke saw that flash of anger and understood; old Jack was playing the fox, and losing no time about it.

"Skullen will do for the other witness," said Weegman, going to the room telephone. "He'll feel bad, of course, but I told him he didn't have a show in the world." He called the operator and gave the number of a room.

While Weegman was engaged, Kennedy handed the agreement over to Locke. "You sign it just as it is," he directed. "You've had your talk with Mr. Weegman, and you know what he said to you. You don't have to chin it over any more."

By this time Weegman had got Skullen on the phone and asked him to come round to Kennedy's room, giving him the number. Locke sat grimly reading the contract until Skullen knocked at the door.

"Maybe you'll feel bad, Mit," said Weegman, admitting the man, "but you know I told you there wasn't a show in the world of me signing you up as manager. It's settled with Locke, and I want you to witness him put his autograph to the paper. Now don't make a growl, but do as you're wanted."

Skullen kept still as directed, but he looked as if Weegman's first words had surprised him a trifle.

Kennedy had produced a fountain pen and thrust it into Locke's hand. "Sign right here, son," he urged. "Let's see how pretty you write."

"Wait!" cried Weegman, his eyes on the southpaw, who had promptly moved up to the little table. "You haven't forgotten our talk? You understand?"

"I haven't forgotten a thing," asserted Lefty, boldly and swiftly writing his name. "There it is!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE WRONG STOOL PIGEON

Skullen and Kennedy attached their names as witnesses. The thing was done; Lefty Locke-Philip Hazelton was the name he wrote on the contract-was now manager of the Blue Stockings. He received a duplicate copy, which he folded and slipped into his pocket.

"Now we're all set for business," said Bailey Weegman. "I congratulate you, Locke. One time I was afraid you didn't have sense enough to welcome Opportunity when she knocked. I'll see you later, Mit, if you're around. We've got to square away now and have a little conference. Don't cry because you didn't get the job."

"Cry-nothin'!" said Skullen. "I wouldn't have taken it if you'd handed it to me with twice the salary."

"Old Mit's disappointed," chuckled Weegman, when the door closed behind him, "but he doesn't want anybody to know it. He'll deny he came looking for the position, of course."

Kennedy had seated himself, and Weegman drew a chair up to the table, producing a packet of papers and running them over until he found the one he wanted.

"Here's a list of the men the Feds have grabbed off us," he said. "Grist, Orth, Temple, Nelson, Hyland, and Lewis. Grist is no particular loss, but Temple and Orth knock a hole in the pitching staff. Nelson was our reliance behind the bat. With Dayly and Lewis gone, the whole side of the infield is wide open. We ought to be able to fill Hyland's place in right garden."

"It's a swell team that's left!" said Locke. "And you told me that Dillon was negotiating with the outlaws."

"He hasn't jumped; he hasn't had the nerve," sneered Weegman, snapping his fingers. "Instead, he's been howling for a contract. You'd find him waiting if you didn't sign him until the first of April." For just a flicker he had actually seemed to betray annoyance because Pink Dillon had not followed the example of the deserters, but he ended with a laugh.

"It seems to me," said the new manager, "that I'd better get busy and try to save the pieces. The men who haven't jumped should be signed up without delay."

"Of course," agreed Weegman blandly. "You must send out the contracts. Unluckily, I haven't any blanks with me, but I'll see that you are furnished with them to-morrow."

"Every day counts, perhaps every hour; by to-morrow we may lose another good man, or more."

"Not much danger, and you don't want to make the mistake of getting into a panic and trying to do things in too much of a hurry. We've been farming some clever youngsters, more than enough to make up a team; but you should consult with Kennedy about them, and take only the right ones. You'll have the most trouble getting hold of pitchers."

"Youngsters," said Locke, "are all right; but do you mean to suggest that we should stop the gaps wholly with men who lack Big League experience? You know how much show that sort of a team would have in the race. We've got to make some deals that will give us some players who have ripened. It'll cost money, too."

"Right there," said Weegman, "is where you're going to need the check-rein. Charles Collier won't stand for needless extravagance in that line, I know, and I shall not countenance the purchasing of high-priced men."

The blood rose into Lefty's face; he tingled to tell the rascal something, but again a warning flicker of Kennedy's left eye restrained him.

"There are lots of good youngsters coming on," said the veteran soothingly. "There were three or four I could have used last season if I'd had room for them. We'll run over the list and see how they'll fit in."

For another hour they continued in conclave, and a dozen times Weegman took occasion to impress upon Locke that he should do nothing definite without receiving Weegman's approval. When he seemed to feel that he had driven this into the new manager's head, he excused himself on the pretext of attending to a pressing matter, and departed, leaving old Jack and Lefty together. Kennedy quietly locked the door. Lefty jumped to his feet and began pacing the floor like a caged tiger.

"Never had such a job to keep my hands off a man!" he raged. "Only for you, I'd--"

"I know," said old Jack, returning and sitting down heavily. "I wanted to kick him myself, and I think I shall do it some day soon. He's crooked as a corkscrew and rotten as a last year's early apple. But he ain't shrewd; he only thinks he is. He's fooled himself. You never agreed to his verbal terms, and, just as I said, he didn't dare put them in writing. According to that contract, you've got as much power as I ever had, and you can exercise it. It's up to you to get busy. Don't wait for contract forms from Weegman; they'll be delayed. I have plenty. Wire the old players who are left that contracts will be mailed to them to-night."

Locke stopped by Kennedy's chair and dropped a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"And you're going to St. Paul?" he said. "You've been handed a wretched deal."

"Nix on the St. Paul business, son; there's nothing to it. That wolf thought I swallowed that guff. Byers is Garrity's friend, and it's plain now that Garrity's mixed up in this dirty business. It was easy enough to ask if I'd consider hooking up with St. Paul. By the time I got round to saying yes, Byers could tell me it was off. This time, Lefty, I'm out of the game for good." His voice sounded heavy and dull, and his shoulders sagged.

The southpaw was silent, words failing him. After a few minutes old Jack looked up into the face of his youthful companion, and smiled wryly.

"You've got a little glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes in baseball," he said. "The fans that pay their money to see the games look on it, generally, as a fine, clean sport—which, in one way, it is. That part the public pays to see, the game, is on the level. There's a good reason: the crookedest magnate in the business—and, believe me, there's one who can look down the back of his own neck without trying to turn round—knows it would spell ruin to put over a frame-up on the open field. By nature the players themselves are like the average run of human critters, honest and dishonest; but experience has taught them that they can't pull off any double deals without cutting their own throats. People who talk about fixed games, especially in the World's Series, show up their ignorance. It can't be done."

"But when it comes to tricks and holdups, and highway robberies and assassination, there's always somethin' doing off stage. What you've seen is only a patch. The men who run things are out for the coin, and they aren't any better, as a rule, than the high financiers who plunder railroads and loot public treasuries. They'll smile in a man's face while they're whetting the knife for his back. Some of them have put the knife into Charles Collier now, and they intend to sink it to the hilt. You've been picked as a cat's-paw to help them pull their chestnuts off the coals. They intend to fatten their batting average at your expense, and when it's all over you'll be knocked out of the box for good. You'll get the blame while they pluck the plums."

"Kennedy," said Locke, his voice hard as chilled steel, "they've picked the wrong stool pigeon. My eyes aren't sewed up. With your help, I'm going to find a way to spoil their villainous schemes. I know you'll help me."

The veteran sprang up, a bit of the old-time fire in his face. "You bet your life, son! That's why I wired for you to come on, and that's why I wanted you to pretend to take the hook and sign up

with Weegman. I knew we could work together, and it puts us in position to get the harpoon into them before they wise up to what's doing. Let's get busy."

CHAPTER XVII

GETTING INTO ACTION

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Locke was for open work and defiance of Weegman, but Kennedy argued against it.

"You want to get the jump on that snake," said the old man, digging a package of contract forms for players out of his traveling bag. "He won't be looking for you to get into action so sudden, and you'll gain a lap before he knows it. When it comes to fighting a polecat, a wise man takes precautions. Weegman's gone to send word to his pals of the slick job he's put over, and he'll be coming back to bother us pretty soon. We don't want to be here when he comes."

So, for the purpose of conducting their private business, another room was engaged, and an arrangement made whereby no person, no matter how insistent he might be, should be told where to find them. Then a telegraph messenger boy was summoned to that room, and telegrams were sent to the still loyal Blue Stockings players, stating that contracts were being mailed for their signatures. Then the contracts were filled out, sealed, and dropped into the mail chute.

A square meal was ordered and served in the private room, and for nearly three hours Lefty and Jack talked. They had many things to tell each other, but their principal topic was the filling of the frightful gaps made in the team by the Federal raids, and both agreed that the time had come when the close-fisted financial policy of the Blue Stockings must be abandoned; players fully as good as the ones lost, or better, if possible, must be obtained at any cost. Various team combinations that seemed to balance to a nicety were made up on paper, but how to get the men coveted was the problem.

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"We've got two catchers left," said Kennedy, "but the best of the pair ain't in the same class as the man we've lost. We've got to have a backstop as good as Nelson. And when it comes to pitchers—say, son, is it possible there ain't any show at all of your coming back?"

"I wish I could answer that," confessed Locke. "At any rate, we've got to have two more first-string men. If this Mysterious Jones I told you of is anywhere near as good as he looked to—"

"Not one chance in a hundred that he's good enough to carry a regular share of the pitching the first season, no matter what he might develop into with experience. The Wolves have been hurt least by the Feds, and you might pick something worth while off Ben Frazer if you paid his price. Last fall he offered to trade me that youngster, Keeper, for Dayly, and since then he's bought Red Callahan from Brennan. That'll put Keeper on the bench. You know what Keeper is, and I've always regretted letting Frazer get him off me for five thousand, but it was Collier's idea. The boy'd look well on our third cushion about now. But don't lose sight of the fact that it's pitchers we've *got* to have."

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Locke took the five-fifty train for New York, leaving Weegman, whom he had succeeded in avoiding, frothing around the Grand in search of him. Kennedy knew how to reach Frazer by wire, and he had received a reply to his telegram that the manager of the Wolves would meet Lefty at the Great Eastern the following night. Between Kennedy and Frazer there had always existed a bond of understanding and friendship.

Despite the burden he had assumed, the new manager of the Blue Stockings slept well. It was this faculty of getting sleep and recuperation under any circumstances that had enabled him to become known as the "Iron Man."

At breakfast the following morning he received a slight shock. Three tables in front of him, with his back turned, sat a man with fine shoulders, a bull neck, and a bullet head. Mit Skullen was traveling eastward by the same train. Lefty cut his breakfast short and left the diner without having been observed.

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"If he should see me, he'd probably take the first opportunity to wire back to Weegman," thought Locke, "and I'm going to follow old Jack's advice about leaving Weegman in the dark for a while."

There was a possibility, of course, that Skullen would come wandering through the train and discover him, but, to his satisfaction, nothing of the kind happened. All the long forenoon he was whirled through a snow-covered country without being annoyed by the appearance of Garrity's henchman, and he had plenty of time to meditate on the situation and the plans laid by himself and Kennedy.

But it was necessary to eat again, and shortly before Albany was reached he returned to the diner, hoping Skullen had already had lunch. The man was not there when he sat down, but he had scarcely given his order when the fellow's hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Hully smokes!" exclaimed Mit, staring down, wide-eyed, at the southpaw. "What's this mean? I can hardly believe me lamps. You must have left Indianap' same time I did, and Weeg asked me twice if I'd seen anything of you."

"Weegman?" said Lefty, startled, but outwardly serene. "Is he on this train?"

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"Nix. Last I know, he was tearing up the Grand looking for you. How's it happened you skipped without dropping him word?"

"I'm going to see my folks, who live in Jersey," Locke answered, truthfully enough.

"But you'll stop in the big town to-night? Where do you hang out?"

"Usually at the Prince Arthur." This was likewise true, although the southpaw had now no intention of putting up there on this occasion.

Mit looked at his watch. "We must be pulling into Albany," he said. "I want to get a paper. See you later."

"Go ahead and shoot your telegram to Weegman," thought Locke. "Any message sent me at the Prince Arthur is liable to remain unopened for some time."

He had finished his lunch and was back in the Pullman when Skullen found him again. The man planted himself at Lefty's side and passed over a newspaper, grinning as he pointed out an item on the sporting page:

Even though it was rumored that old Jack Kennedy was to be let out, the selection of Locke as his successor is a surprise. As a pitcher Locke has had an amazingly successful career and has made an enviable reputation, but he has had no managerial experience, having come to the Big League directly from the bushes. Whether or not he has the stuff of which capable managers are made is a matter of uncertainty; but, with the Blue Stockings badly chewed to pieces by the Feds, Collier might have been expected, had he decided to drop Kennedy, to replace the veteran with a man of some practical knowledge in that line. The policy of the Stockings for the last year or two has been rather queer, to say the least, and the effect upon the team can be seen in its present rating.

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That was the final paragraph. Collier, sick and absent in Europe, was credited with the deal; not a word about Weegman. The rascal, pulling the wires, was keeping himself in the background. For a moment Lefty thought of Jack Stillman, a reporter friend, and felt a desire to give him some inside information which, in cold type, would be pretty certain to make the interested public sit up and take notice. But the time was not ripe for a move like that, and he dismissed the thought.

Still grinning, Skullen jammed his elbow into Locke's ribs. "How do you like that?" he inquired gloatingly. "That's the way them cheap newspaper ginks pans you out when they get a chance."

The southpaw was suddenly attacked by an intense distaste for the company of Tom Garrity's coarse hireling. He handed the paper back in silence. But the feeling of dislike and antagonism was evidently felt by Skullen, for, after a few minutes' silence, he got up and walked out of the car; and, to his satisfaction, Lefty saw no more of him during the remainder of the journey.

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An uncomfortable storm of rain and sleet was raging when New York was reached shortly after nightfall. A taxi bore Locke to the Great Eastern, where he learned that Frazer had not yet arrived. Having registered, he took the elevator for his room on the seventh floor, and, as he was borne upward, a descending car, well filled with people, slipped silently past, and Lefty caught a momentary glimpse of their faces through the iron grillwork. One face he saw quite plainly, that of a charming young woman in her early twenties—a face he recognized at once.

"Virginia Collier!" gasped Lefty, in astonishment.

He did not leave the car; back to the main floor he went. After hastily looking around for the young woman he sought, he made inquiries at the desk. He was informed that no Miss Collier was stopping in the hotel. Still confident that he had not been mistaken, and thinking it probable she was dining there with friends, he had her paged. Even when the report came that no one answered to the name, he did not give up. From various vantage points, he spent at least twenty minutes looking over the people at dinner in the main dining room, the grill, and the palm room. At the end of that time he was confident that Charles Collier's daughter was not dining at the Great Eastern.

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"Of course," he admitted to himself, "it's possible I was mistaken, but I would have sworn it was Virginia."

He went up to his room and prepared for dinner, burdened by the conviction that he had been baffled; that fate had played him a trick. He would have given much for fifteen minutes' conversation with the daughter of the Big Chief, and he was impressed with the belief that he had passed her almost within an arm's reach.

This feeling was followed by one of uncertainty regarding Frazer. Old Jack had assured him that the manager of the Wolves would meet him at the Great Eastern, and he had relied on Kennedy without attempting to get into direct communication with Frazer, and perhaps, after all, he would not come.

"Then I'll have to run him down," considered Lefty. "And I want to get to him before Weegman can get to me. If I don't, he'll be sure to try to ball up any deal I attempt to put across."

Choosing to eat in the grill, he notified the desk where he could be found should any one ask for him. But he had scarcely begun on the first course when he heard his name spoken, and looked up to find Ben Frazer smiling down upon him.

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"Just in time to get in on the eats, I see," said the manager of the famous Wolves, shaking hands with Locke. "It's a rotten night, my feet are wet, and I'm awfully hungry. Only for Kennedy's message I'd be on my way to Chicago."

A waiter placed a chair, and he sat down, took the menu card, and quickly gave his order. He was a short, thick-set, shrewd-faced man; his hair was turning gray on the temples, but he seemed to have lost little of the nervous energy and alertness that had been his in the old days when he had been called the swiftest second sacker in the business. He had been an umpire baiter then, but in later years his methods had changed, and never once since becoming a manager had he been given the gate. Nevertheless, while he had gained in diplomacy, he had relaxed no whit in aggressiveness. Led by old Ben, the Wolves fought to the last ditch. "Now, tell me about it," he requested, turning to Lefty. "How in thunder did you happen to let them rope you into such a mess?"

"You mean—"

"Getting tied up as manager of the Blue Stockings. Boy, you're the goat; you've been chosen for the sacrifice. Somebody had to fall, of course, but it's a shame that you should be the victim. I'd thought you too wise to tumble into that trap."

"Then you think it is a trap?" asked the southpaw, feeling the blood hot in his cheeks.

"Of course it is! The Stockings have been undermined and blown wide open. They've got as much show this year as a snowball would have in a baker's oven. They'll land in the subcellar with a sickening thud, and there's no way of stopping them."

"No way—"

"No way under heaven, take it from me! I've been in the business long enough to know what I'm talking about. It takes years to build up such a fighting machine, and, when it's torn to pieces, rebuilding is bound to be another job of years. The public won't understand. You'll get the kicks and the curses. As a successful pitcher you've been a favorite; as an unsuccessful manager you'll be about as popular as a rusty spike in an automobile tire. Crowds are always fickle. When a man's winning they howl their heads off for him; but let him strike a losing streak and they scramble like mad to pelt him with mud and brick-bats."

"But somebody has to build up a team."

"Somebody has to start it and get the blame. He's the goat. Where's Burkett, who managed the Wolves before I came in? Out in the Border League. Where's Ashton and Gerrish, who struggled with the Blue Stockings before Kennedy stepped in on the turn of the tide? One's running a cigar store in Kewanee, the other's drinking himself to death in Muskegon; both left the game with busted reputations and broken hearts. Where's McConnell, who tried to make a ball team of the Hornets before Brennan's day? He took to the coke, and his friends are paying for his keep in a private bug-house. Where's Decker, who had a crack at the Panthers—But what's the use! There's no surer way for a good man to ruin his career than to manage a losing ball team."

"In that case," said Locke, "I've got to manage a winner."

Frazer gazed at him pityingly. "Swell chance you've got! About one in fifty thousand. You haven't got the makings of an ordinary second-division team left."

"I know the Feds have copped off some of our best men, but—"

"Some! Some! I should so remark! But don't blame it all on the Feds. They were practically invited to come in and take their pick. The bars were let down. All your players knew there was trouble. They heard all sorts of rumors that made them nervous and uncertain. They didn't see any contracts coming their way to be signed. They knew there was something the matter with Collier. It was even said he'd gone crazy. They knew Kennedy was going to get out from under. There was gossip about old men being shunted and new blood taken on. What they didn't know was where they were at. It was all nicely worked to get them to take the running long jump."

"Then you believe there was a plot to smash the team?"

"You don't have to be a mind reader to get my opinion, but I'm saying this here private, man to man. I'm not goin' round talking for publication."

"But you're wrong about Kennedy getting out; he was dropped."

"Was he?"

"Sure."

Frazer twisted his face into a queer grimace. "Old Jack Kennedy was too wise to stick on under any such conditions. He knew what it meant, and I'll guarantee that he wouldn't have managed the Blue Stockings this year for twice the salary he got last. What I've got against him is that he didn't put you wise before you tied up."

"It was on his advice that I consented to manage the team," replied Locke.

"What?" exclaimed Frazer. "Is that straight? He advised you to—The infernal old scoundrel!"

Locke warmed immediately in defense of Kennedy. The manager of the Wolves listened, uncertain, shaking his head doubtfully.

"He may not have meant it," he admitted presently, "but he's got you in bad, boy. You haven't got a show against the powers you'll have to buck, and the conditions that were fixed up for you in advance."

"As to that, time will tell," said Lefty. "I'm going to make one almighty try. First, I've got to plug the gaps. What have you got to sell that I want?"

"Nothing that you'll pay the price for. I know Collier's policy."

"Collier is in Europe, and I'm manager of the team, with full authority to make any deals I please. Here's my contract." He placed it before old Ben. "Collier will have to stand for any trade I put through. I'll buy Smoke Jordan off you."

"You won't! I won't sell him."

"Then how about Jack Keeper? You've got Red Callahan, and I need a third baseman."

Frazer finished his soup. "I won't sell you Keeper," he said; "but I'll trade him. I need a center fielder in the place of Courtney, who's retired. I'll trade Keeper for Herman Brock."

At first Locke had no relish for a trade that would add to the Blue Stockings infield at the expense of the outfield, even though in his secret heart he knew Brock had during last season shown vague symptoms of slowing down. Then he remembered the list of reserves given him by Kennedy, on which there was one fast, hard-hitting youngster who had been sent back to the Western Canada League, and had made a brilliant record covering the middle garden for Medicine Hat.

"I don't want to trade, I want to buy," he persisted. Then, as if struck by second thought: "I'll tell you what I will do; I'll give you Brock for two men. That'll help. We need a catcher. After King broke his leg you found a great catcher in Darrow. I'll trade you Brock for Keeper and King."

"Brick King!" exploded Frazer indignantly. "What do you take me for?"

"A business man. You've got three first-string catchers now; two are all you need. You don't even know that King's leg is all right. I'm willing to take a chance on him. Brock batted over three hundred last season. He's the hitter you need to fill that vacancy."

"Not Brick King," said the manager of the Wolves. "If I didn't use him behind the bat for the whole season, he's a fancy pinch hitter. You've gotter have pitchers. How about O'Brien?"

But Locke knew that Chick O'Brien, the veteran, had cracked already. Even though on hot days, when he could get his wing to work, he showed flashes of his former brilliant form, and had, under such conditions, last year pitched three shut-out games for the Wolves, Chick's record for the season showed a balance on the wrong side. The southpaw held out for King. Frazer offered one of the second-string catchers. Lefty waved the offer aside.

"Hang it!" snapped Frazer. "Give me Brock and ten thousand dollars, and you may have Keeper and King."

"You don't want much!" laughed Locke. "I'll give you Brock and five thousand."

All the way through to the desert they dickered and bargained. Frazer wanted Brock, and wanted him bad. Sympathetic though he might feel toward Lefty, he never permitted sympathy to interfere with business. Brock was the man to fill the position left vacant by Bob Courtney, and he was sure the Wolves would not be weakened by the loss of Keeper. But Brick King—"What salary are you paying King?" Lefty suddenly asked.

"Five thousand. The Feds got after him, and I had to make it that."

The southpaw laughed. "With Darrow doing most of the backstopping, and Larson ready to fill in any moment he's needed, you're going to keep a five-thousand-dollar catcher on the bench for a pinch hitter! I just called you a business man, but I feel like taking it back. Isn't Madden likely to kick over a five-thousand-dollar pinch hitter?" Madden owned the team.

"Madden be hanged!" rasped Frazer, biting off the end of a cigar he had taken from his case. "I'm the manager! Madden isn't always butting in and paring down expenses, like Collier." He pulled vigorously at the cigar, while the attentive waiter applied a lighted match.

Lefty had declined a cigar. He smoked occasionally, and would have done so now, but to do so would indicate an inclination to settle down and continue the dickering, and he had decided to make a bluff at bringing the affair to an end. He called for the check, and insisted on paying the bill for both.

"Sorry I've put you to so much trouble, Frazer," he said. "It was Kennedy's idea that I might do business with you, but it's evident he was mistaken. I've got some other cards to play, and time is precious." He settled the bill and tipped the waiter.

Old Ben sat regarding Locke thoughtfully, rolling out great puffs of smoke. The younger man was about to rise.

"Hold on," requested the manager of the Wolves. "You're a regular mule, aren't you? How do you expect to make a trade without compromising at all? You won't even meet me halfway, confound you! You—"

"I'll own up that I was a bit hasty," said Lefty, showing a nervous desire to get away. "I made that five-thousand offer without thinking much, but you understand I'm rather desperate. If Collier were here, he'd probably put the kibosh on it—if he found out before the trade was closed. After that he'd have to stand for it, no matter how hard he kicked. Let's forget it."

Then Frazer showed that peculiar trait of human nature that makes a person doubly eager for something that seems to be on the point of slipping away. In his mind he had already fitted Herman Brock into that gap in center field that had given him more or less worry. The adjustment had pleased him; it seemed to balance the team to a hair. It would give him renewed assurance of another pennant and a slice of the World's Series money. It was Courtney's hitting in the last series that had enabled the Wolves to divide the big end of that money; and, like Courtney, Brock was a terror with the ash.

"You mule!" said Frazer. "Let's go up to your room and fix up the papers. It's a trade."

CHAPTER XIX

A FLEETING GLIMPSE

Locke betrayed no sign of the triumph that he felt. Had Frazer held out, he would have given the ten thousand asked, and considered himself lucky to get a catcher and a third sacker, both young men, and coming, in exchange for an outfielder who could not possibly last more than another season or two. Collier might squirm when he learned of the trade, but perhaps he could be made to see the desperate necessity of it. The thought that Bailey Weegman would gnash his teeth and froth at the mouth gave Lefty an added thrill of pleasure. The first move to circumvent Weegman and the scheming scoundrel behind him, Garrity, had been put through.

"All right," he said, with something like a sigh. "If you hold me to my word, I suppose it's a trade. We may as well make out the papers."

"What's that about a trade?" asked a voice at the southpaw's back. "What are you two ginks cooking up? I saw you chinnin', and thought there was something in the wind."

Skullen had entered the grill and come up without being observed. There was nothing thinskin about Mit, and apparently he had forgotten the rebuff given him by Locke on the train.

"Hello, Mit!" said Frazer. "You're just in time to be a witness. I've traded King and Keeper for Herm Brock. We're going up to make out the papers now. Come on!"

Locke rose, his eyes on the intruder, repressing a laugh as he noted the man's expression of incredulity.

"Traded!" exclaimed Skullen. "With Locke? Say, who's backing Locke in this deal? Weeg told me when I talked with him about being manager—that any trade that was made would have to be confirmed by him. Has he agreed to this deal?"

"He don't have to," said Lefty. "There's nothing in my contract that gives him any authority to interfere with any deal I may choose to make."

Mit followed them from the room and to the elevator. He was bursting to say more, but he did not know just how to say it. When they were in Locke's room he began:

"Keeper and King for that old skate Brock! What's the matter with you, Ben? You've got bats in your belfry! Why, you've gone clean off your nut! You've—"

Frazer cut him short. "That'll be about enough from you, Mit! Don't try to tell me my business. I'm getting five thousand bones in the bargain."

"Hey?" shouted Skullen, turning on the young manager of the Blue Stockings. "Five thousand bucks! You're coughing up that sum without consulting anybody? Say, you're going in clean over your head. You'd better hold up and wire Weegman what you're thinking about. If you don't—"

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," interrupted Locke sharply. "You seem to be greatly interested in this business, for an outsider."

Skullen was choked off, but he gurgled and growled while the papers were being filled out; he even seemed disposed to refuse to sign as a witness, but finally did so, muttering:

"There's going to be the devil to pay over this, you can bet your sweet life on that!"

Lefty didn't care; it was settled, and neither Collier nor his representative could repudiate the bargain. Let the crooks rage. The only thing the southpaw regretted was that Weegman would, doubtless, quickly learn what had been done; for it was a practical certainty that Skullen would lose little time in wiring to him. In fact, Mit soon made an excuse to take his departure, and, in fancy, Locke saw him making haste to send the message.

Frazer was wise, also. "You're going to find yourself bucking a rotten combination, Locke," he said. "They're bound to put it over you before you're through."

"I should worry and lose my sleep!" was the light retort. "Give me a cigar now, Ben; I haven't felt so much like smoking in a month."

Locke slept that night in peace. In the infield there were two big holes left to be filled, short and second; but the reserve list afforded a dozen men to pick from, and it was Lefty's theory that a certain number of carefully chosen youngsters, mixed in with veterans who could steady them, frequently added the needed fire and dash to a team that was beginning to slow down. Herman Brock was gone, but out in Medicine Hat Jock Sheridan had covered the middle garden like a carpet, and had batted four hundred and ten-some hitting! With Welch and Hyland on his right and left, Sheridan might compel the Big League fans to give him something more than a casual once over.

But Locke's great pleasure lay in the fact that he had secured a backstop he had not dared to hope for. Even now he could not understand why Frazer had been induced to part with Brick King, the catcher whose almost uncanny skill in getting the very limit out of second-rate and faltering pitchers had lifted the Wolves out of the second division two years ago, and made them pennant contenders up to the final game of the season. There was the possibility, of course, that old Ben believed that King had not thoroughly recovered from the injury that had sent him to the hospital last August; but a broken leg was something that rarely put an athlete down and out indefinitely.

"In my estimation," thought Lefty serenely, as sleep was stealing over him, "King has got more brains and uses them better than any backstop in the league."

The morning papers had something to say about the deal:

The new manager of the Blue Stockings has been getting busy. By good authority we are informed that he has traded Center Fielder Herman Brock for two of Ben Frazer's youngsters, King and Keeper. Through this deal he has obtained a catcher and a third baseman, but has opened up a hole in the outfield big enough to roll an *Imperator* cargo of base hits through. Of course, the gaping wounds of the Stockings must be plugged, but it seems like bad surgery to inflict further mutilation in order to fill the gashes already made. And when it comes to driving in scores when they count, we predict that old Herman and his swatstick are going to be lamented. Keeper is more or less of an unknown quantity. It's true that Brick King, in condition, is an excellent backstop and a good hitter, but it must not be forgotten that he has not played since he was injured last August. And, incidentally, it should be remembered that Ben Frazer has a head as long as a tape measure. An expert appraiser should be called in to inspect any property on which Frazer shows a disposition to relinquish his grip. It is a good, even-money proposition that old Ben and the Wolves will get their hooks into the World's Series boodle again this year.

Lefty smiled over this, his lips curling a bit scornfully. The opening of the real baseball season was yet a long distance away, but the newspaper writers were compelled to grind out a required amount of "dope" each day, and were working hard to keep up their average. Some of them were clever and ingenious in their phrasing, but nearly all of them betrayed a lack of originality or courage in forming and expressing individual opinions. The Wolves had won the pennant and the world's championship last season, and up to date they had been damaged less than any club in organized ball by the raids of the Federals; some wise pen pusher had therefore predicted that the Wolves would cop the bunting again, and was supported in this opinion by all the little fellows, who ran, bleating, after the wise one, like a flock of sheep chasing a bellwether.

It was evident that, with no apparent exceptions, this bleating flock looked on the Blue Stockings as a drifting derelict that was due to be blown up and sunk. For Locke they had only pity and mild contempt because he had permitted himself to be dragged into the impossible attempt to salvage the worthless hulk. Even old Ben Frazer, than whom none was reckoned more keen and astute, had expressed such a sentiment without concealment. A weak man would have felt some qualms; Lefty felt none. He had not sought the job; in a way, fate had thrust it upon him; and now the more unsurmountable the difficulties appeared the stronger he became to grapple with them. Like a soldier going into battle, exulted and fired by a high and lofty purpose, his heart sang within him.

Before going to bed, Lefty had wired Kennedy concerning the deal with Frazer, and he believed Skullen had made haste to telegraph Weegman. He rose in the morning fully expecting to get a red-hot message from Collier's private secretary, and was surprised when nothing of the sort reached him. While at breakfast, however, he received an answer from old Jack:

Good work! Congratulations. Keep it up. KENNEDY.

Weegman's silence led Locke to do some thinking, and suddenly he understood. Skullen had discovered him on the Knickerbocker Special just before the train had pulled into Albany, and immediately Mit had hastened away to buy a paper. Of course he had then sent word to Weegman, who was now on his way to New York.

"But he can't get here before six o'clock to-night," thought Lefty, "and my train for the South leaves at three-thirty-four."

He did not relish running away from Weegman, and it had gone against the grain when, upon the advice of Kennedy, he had suddenly left Indianapolis. But he knew old Jack was wise, and the more he could accomplish without being interfered with by the rascal he despised, the stronger his position for open fighting would be when it became necessary to defy him to his face.

His first duty that day was to visit his parents, and, shortly after breakfast, he took the tube for Jersey. Less than an hour's journey brought him to the Hazelton home, and, after something like

an hour spent with them, he left them in a much more cheerful and hopeful frame of mind.

On returning to the city he called up the office of Franklin Parlme. To his disappointment, he was informed that Parlme had not returned since leaving for Indianapolis. He had expected the man could inform him whether or not Virginia Collier was in New York, and, if she were, how to find her and obtain the brief interview he desired. For he was sure that a short talk with Charles Collier's daughter would serve to clear away many of the uncertainties with which he was surrounded.

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But there were other things to be done, and Lefty was kept on the jump, without time, even, to snatch a hasty lunch. When a person attempts to accomplish a great deal in a brief period in New York, he often finds he has shouldered a heavy load. By two o'clock in the afternoon he realized that it would be impossible for him to take the three-thirty-four southbound from the Pennsylvania Station. There was a slower train leaving at nine-thirty; that was the best he could do.

He believed Weegman would rush to the Great Eastern as soon as he arrived. Locke had left the Great Eastern, and there was little chance of encountering the man elsewhere. Once or twice he thought of Skullen, and wondered if he had made an effort to keep track of him.

"If so," laughed the southpaw, "he has been some busy person."

At six o'clock he was appeasing a ravenous appetite in a quiet restaurant. With the exception of the fact that he had not been able to find Virginia Collier, he had done everything he had set out to do. And he had wired Cap'n Wiley that he would soon be on his way with a Blue Stockings contract for Mysterious Jones to sign.

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In order to pass the time and obtain a little diversion, he went to a motion-picture show after dinner, having first secured accommodations on the train, and checked his bag at the station. He left the theater shortly before nine o'clock, and had reached Broadway and Thirty-third Street, when a lighted limousine, containing two persons besides the driver, drove past him. He obtained a good look at both passengers, a man, who was talking earnestly, and a woman, smiling as she listened. He knew he was not mistaken this time: the man was Bailey Weegman; the woman was Virginia Collier.

CHAPTER XX

A RIDDLE TO SOLVE

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Locke stood still, staring after the swiftly receding car. He thought of pursuit, but, as a heavy rain was falling, there was no available taxi in the immediate vicinity. By the time he could secure one the limousine would have vanished, leaving no possible hope of tracing it.

Weegman and Virginia Collier together and on terms plainly more than usually friendly! What was the explanation? She had arrived in New York, after all, and it was apparent that Weegman knew where to find her when he reached the city. That his company was distinctly agreeable to her was evident from the fleeting glimpse Lefty had obtained. As Parlme's rival, the man held the favor of Charles Collier. Had the baseball magnate at last succeeded in breaking down the prejudice and opposition of his daughter? Was it possible that Weegman, not Parlme, was the magnet that had drawn the girl back from Europe?

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lefty. "She'd never throw over Frank for that chuckling scoundrel."

But was it impossible? Vaguely he recalled something like a change in the tone of Virginia's last letters to Janet; somehow they had not seemed as frank and confiding as former letters. And eventually, to Janet's worryment and perplexity, Virginia had ceased to write at all.

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Before Locke flashed a picture of Parlme as he had appeared in Indianapolis, nervous, perplexed, and, by his own admission, greatly worried. Parlme had confessed that he had received only two very unsatisfactory letters from Virginia since she had sailed for Europe with her father, and more than a month had elapsed since the second of these had come to his hands. Of itself, this was enough to upset a man as much in love with Miss Collier as Parlme undoubtedly was. But, at the time, Lefty had vaguely felt that the automobile salesman was holding something back, and now he was sure. Parlme's pride, and his secret hope that he was mistaken, had prevented him from confessing that the girl had changed in her attitude toward him.

True, Virginia had cabled that she was sailing on the *Victoria*, and had asked him to meet her, and although she had not sailed on that ship, yet she was now in New York. Here was a riddle to solve. Did the solution lie in the assumption that, having decided to break her tentative engagement in a face-to-face talk with Parlme, the girl's courage had failed her, leading her to change her plans? The fact that he was with her now seemed to prove that Weegman's information regarding her movements and intentions had been more accurate than Parlme's.

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It did not appear plausible that such a girl could be persuaded, of her own free will, to throw over Franklin Parlme for Bailey Weegman. But perhaps she was not exercising her own free will; perhaps some powerful and mastering influence had been brought to bear upon her. Was it not possible, also, that her father, whose singular behavior had lately aroused comment and

speculation, was likewise a victim of this mastering influence? While the idea was a trifle bizarre, and savored of sensational fiction, such things did happen, if reports of them, to be found almost daily in the newspapers, could be believed. But when Locke tried to imagine the chuckling and oily Weegman as a hypnotist, dominating both Collier and his daughter by the power of an evil spell, he failed. It was too preposterous.

One thing, however, was certain: evil powers of a materialistic nature were at work, and they had succeeded in making a decided mess of Charles Collier's affairs. To defeat them, the strategy and determination of united opposition would be required, and, in view of the task, the opposition seemed weak and insufficient. Even Parlmees, who might render some aid, was not to be reached. He had obtained a month's leave from business in order to settle his own suspicions and fears, but he had not returned to New York. Where was he?

Lefty glanced over his shoulder as the *Herald* clock began to hammer out the hour of nine. Then he set his face westward and made for the Pennsylvania Station at a brisk pace. Reaching his destination, he wrote and sent to Parlmees's office address a message that contained, in addition to the positive assurance that Virginia was in town and had been seen with Weegman, a statement of the southpaw's suspicions, which amounted almost to convictions, concerning the whole affair. There didn't seem to be much more that he could do. He had secured his accommodations on the Florida Mail, but he expected to be back on the field of battle in the North within the shortest possible time.

Before going aboard his train, he bought the latest edition of an evening newspaper, and, naturally, turned at once to the sporting page. Almost by instinct his eyes found something of personal concern, a statement that Manager Garrity would strengthen the Rockets by securing an unknown "dummy" pitcher who had been discovered by Scout Skullen, and was said to be a wizard. Skullen, it was intimated, was off with a commission from Garrity to sign up his find.

There was no longer any doubt in Locke's mind that Skullen had watched the work of Mysterious Jones, and intended to nail the mute for the Rockets. Even now, he had departed on his mission. Probably he had left at three-thirty-four on the very train Lefty had meant to take. If so, he would reach Florida many hours ahead of the southpaw, and would have plenty of time to accomplish his purpose. True, Locke had made a fair and square bargain with Wiley and Jones, but, having been unable to get Jones' signature on a Blue Stockings contract at the time, the deal would not be binding if the mute chose to go back on it.

Not a little apprehensive, Lefty sent still another message to Cap'n Wiley. After which he went aboard the train, found his berth, and turned in.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN AHEAD

Locke was the first passenger to leap off the train when it stopped at Vienna. He made for one of the two rickety carriages that were drawn up beside the station platform. The white-wooled old negro driver straightened on his seat, signaling with his whip, and called: "Right dis way, sah; dis way fo' the Lithonia House."

"Is there a baseball game in this town to-day, uncle?" asked Lefty.

"Yes, sah, dere sho am. Dey's gwine to be some hot game, so ever'body say. Our boys gwine buck up against dem Wind Jabbers, an' dere'll be a reg'ler ruction out to de pahk."

"What time does the game begin?"

"Free o'clock am de skaduled hour fo' de obsequies, sah. Dey's out to de pahk now, sah, an' 'most ever'body could git dere has gone, too."

Locke looked at his watch. "Thirty minutes before the game starts. How far is your park?"

"'Bout a mile, sah, mo' uh less."

"Two dollars, if you get me there in a hurry."

"Two dollahs, sah? Yes, sah! Step right in, sah, an' watch dis heah streak o' locomotion transpose yo' over de earth surface. Set tight an' hol' fast."

Tossing his overcoat and bag into the rear of the carriage, Lefty sprang in. The old negro gave a shrill yell, and cracked his whip with a pistol-like report. The yell and the crack electrified the rawboned old nag into making a wild leap as if trying to jump out of the thills. It was a marvel that the spliced and string-tied harness held. The southpaw was flung down upon the rear seat, and it was a wonder that he did not go flying over the low back of it and out of the carriage. He grabbed hold with both hands, and held fast. Round the corner of the station spun the carriage on two wobbly wheels, and away it careened at the heels of the galloping horse, the colored driver continuing to yell and crack his whip. Two dollars!

The ride from the station to the baseball park was brief but exciting. The distance could not have been more than half a mile, and, considering the conveyance, it was made in record time.

"Whoa, yo' Nancy Hanks!" shouted the driver, surging back on the reins and stopping the animal

so abruptly that Lefty was nearly pitched into the forward seat. "Did I heah yo' say you wanted to git heah in a hurry, sah?"

Locke jumped out. "That's the shortest mile I ever traveled," he said, handing over the price promised. "But then, when it comes to driving, Barney Oldfield has nothing on you."

Carrying his overcoat and bag, he hurried to the gate and paid the price of admission. A goodly crowd had gathered, and the local team was practicing on the field. Over at one side some of the visitors were getting in a little light batting practice. Mysterious Jones was warming up with Schaeffer. A short distance behind Jones stood Cap'n Wiley, his legs planted wide, his arms folded, his ear cocked, listening to Mit Skullen, who was talking earnestly. Lefty strode hastily toward the pair.

"Sell him!" said the Marine Marvel, in reply to the scout, as the southpaw approached behind them. "Of course I will. But you made one miscue, mate; you should have come straight to me in the first place, instead of superflouing away your time seeking to pilfer him off me by stealth. What price do you respectfully tender?"

Locke felt a throb of resentful anger. Regardless of a square bargain already made, Wiley was ready to negotiate with Skullen. However, Mit had not yet succeeded in his purpose, and the southpaw was on hand to maintain a prior claim. Involuntarily he halted, waiting for the scout's offer.

"As you aren't in any regular league," said Mit, "by rights I don't have to give you anything for him; but if you'll jolly him into putting his fist to a contract, I'll fork over fifty bones out of my own pocket. Garrity won't stand for it, so I'll have to come through with the fifty myself."

"Your magnanimous offer staggers me!" exclaimed Wiley. "Allow me a moment to subdue my emotions. However and nevertheless, I fear me greatly that my bottom price would be slightly more than that."

"Well, what is your bottom price?" demanded Skullen. "Put it down to the last notch."

"I will. I'll give you bed-rock figures. Comprehend me, mate, I'll pare it right down to the bone, and you can't buy Jones a measly, lonesome cent less. I'll sell him to you for just precisely fifty thousand dollars."

The scout's jaw dropped, and he stared at the little man, who stared up at him in return, one eyelid slightly lowered, an oddly provocative expression on his swarthy face.

Slowly the look of incredulous disbelief turned to wrath. The purple color surged upward from Mit's bull neck into his scarred face; his huge hands closed.

"What are you trying to hand me, you blamed little runt?" he snarled. "Where's the joke?"

"No joke at all, I hasten to postulate," said Wiley. "The scandalous fact is that I couldn't sell him to you at all without scuttling and sinking my sacred honor. But human nature is frail and prone to temptation, and for the sum of fifty thousand dollars I'd inveigle Jones into signing with you, even though never again as long as I should dwell on this terrestrial sphere could I look my old college chump, Lefty Locke, in the countenance."

Skullen's astonishment was a sight to behold. He made strange, wheezing, gurgling sounds in his throat. Presently one of his paws shot out and fastened on Cap'n Wiley's shoulder.

"What's that you're saying about Lefty Locke?" he demanded. "What are you giving me?"

"Straight goods, Mit," stated the southpaw serenely, as he stepped forward. "Too bad you wasted so much time making a long and useless trip."

Skullen came round with something like his old deftness of whirling in the ring when engaged in battle. Never in all his life had his battered face worn an uglier look. For a moment, however, he seemed to doubt the evidence of his eyes.

"Locke!" he gasped. "Here!"

"Yes, indeed," returned the new manager of the Blue Stockings pleasantly. "I reckoned you would be ahead of me, Mit; but, as a man of his word, Wiley couldn't do business with you. And without his aid there was little chance for you to make arrangements with Jones."

Skullen planted his clenched fists upon his hips and gazed at the southpaw with an expression of unrepressed hatred. His bearing, as well as his look, threatened assault. Lefty dropped his traveling bag to the ground, and tossed the overcoat he had been compelled to wear in the North upon it. He felt that it would be wise for him to have both hands free and ready for use.

CHAPTER XXII

A DOUBTFUL VICTORY

"Who sent you here?" demanded the belligerent individual. "What business have you got coming poking your nose into my affairs? You'd better chase yourself sudden."

Instead of exhibiting alarm, Lefty laughed in the man's face. "Don't make a show of yourself,

Mit," he advised. "Bluster won't get you any ball players; at least, it won't get you this one. I've already made a deal for Jones."

"You haven't got his name on a contract; you hadn't time. If you had, Wiley'd told me."

"I made a fair trade for him before I went North."

Into Skullen's eyes there came a look of understanding and satisfaction. His lips curled back from his ugly teeth.

"You didn't have any authority to make a trade then, for you weren't manager of the Stockings. You can't put anything like that over on me. If you don't chase yourself, I'll throw you over the fence."

Sensing an impending clash, with the exception of the mute and the catcher, the Wind Jammers ceased their desultory practice and watched for developments. A portion of the spectators, also becoming aware that something unusual was taking place, turned their attention to the little triangular group not far from the visitors' bench.

"You couldn't get Jones if you threw me over into Georgia," said Locke, unruffled. "It won't do you any good to start a scrap."

"Permit me to impersonate the dove of peace," pleaded Cap'n Wiley. "Lefty is absolutely voracious in his statement that he made a fair and honorable compact with me, by which Jones is to become the legitimate chattel of the Blue Stockings. Still," he added, shaking his head and licking his lips, "flesh is weak and liable to err. If I had seen fifty thousand simoleons coming my way in exchange for the greatest pitcher of modern times, I'm afraid I should have lacked the energy to side-step them. The root of all evil has sometimes tempted me from the path of rectitude. But now Lefty is here, and the danger is over. It's no use, Skully, old top; the die is cast. You may as well submit gracefully to the inveterable."

Muttering inaudibly, Skullen turned and walked away.

"I have a contract in my pocket ready for the signature of Jones," said Lefty. "Will you get him to put his name to it before the game starts?"

"It will give me a pang of pleasure to do so," was the assurance.

There on the field, envied by his teammates, Mysterious Jones used Locke's fountain pen to place his signature—A. B. Jones was the name he wrote—upon the contract that bound him to the Blue Stockings. What the initials stood for not even Wiley knew. For a moment the mute seemed to hesitate, but the Marine Marvel urged him on, and the deed was done.

"If you cater to his little giddyocyncracies," said the sailor, "you'll find him a pearl beyond price. Unless you're afraid Skully may return and mar your pleasure, you may sit on the bench with us and watch him toy with the local bric-a-brac. It is bound to be a painfully one-sided affair."

"Skullen," laughed Lefty, "has ceased to cause me special apprehension. The contract is signed now."

So Locke sat on the bench and watched his new pitcher perform. When he walked to the mound, Jones seemed, if possible, more somber and tragic than usual, and he certainly had his speed with him. Yet neither the ominous appearance of the mute nor his blinding smoke was sufficient to faze the Vienna batters, who cracked him for three clean singles in the last half of the opening inning, and then failed to score because of foolish base running.

"He seems to be rather hittable to-day," observed Locke. "What's the matter, Wiley? This Vienna bunch doesn't look particularly good to me; just a lot of amateurs who never saw real players, I should say."

"That's it; that's what ails them, for one thing," replied the manager of the Wind Jammers. "They have accumulated together no special knowledge of Simon poor baseball talent, and so they don't know enough to be scared. Even the great Mathewson has confessed that the worst bumping he ever collided with was handed out by a bunch of bushers who stood up to the dish, shut their blinkers when he pitched, and swung blind at the pill. These lobsterst don't realize that Jonesy's fast one would pass right through a batter without pausing perceptibly if it should hit him, and so they toddle forth without qualms, whatever they are, and take a slam at the globule. Next round I'll have to get out there on the turf and warn them; I'll put the fear of death into their hearts. Get them to quaking and they won't touch the horsehide."

But such a program didn't suit Locke. "If all Jones has is his speed and the fear it inspires, he won't travel far in fast company. You ought to know that, Wiley. Big League batters will knock the cover off the fast one unless a pitcher puts something else on it. Sit still once, to please me, and let's see what Jones can do without the assistance of your chatter."

"It's hardly a square deal," objected the Marine Marvel. "The jinx has been keeping company with us ever since we struck Fernandon. From that occasion up to the present date, Anno Domino, we haven't won a single consecutive game. Such bad luck has hurt my feelings; it has grieved me to the innermost abscess of my soul."

"Do you mean to say that these country teams have been trimming you, with Jones in the box?"

"Alas and alack! I can't deny it unless I resort to fabrication, which I never do. The Euray Browns tapped Jonesy for seventeen heart-breaking bingles, and the Pikeville Greyhounds lacerated his delivery even more painfully. My own brilliant work in the box has been sadly insufficient to

stem, the tide of disaster.”

Locke frowned. What success, or lack of it, Wiley had had as a pitcher was a matter of no moment; but the statement that amateur teams of no particular standing had found Mysterious Jones an easy mark was disturbing. Was it possible that he had been led, with undue haste, to fritter away good money for a pitcher who would prove worthless in the Big League? True, the mute had seemed to show something in the Fernandon game, but in similar contests Lefty had seen many a pinheaded, worthless country pitcher give a fine imitation of Walter Johnson in top-notch form. The test of the bush was, in reality, no test at all.

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Throughout five innings the southpaw succeeded in restraining Wiley, and during that portion of the game the Viennas found Jones for nine singles and two doubles, accumulating four runs. Only for bad judgment on the paths they might have secured twice as many tallies. In the same period the local pitcher, using a little dinky slow curve, held the visitors to one score. The mute seemed to be trying hard enough, but he could not keep his opponents from hitting.

With the opening of the sixth, Wiley broke the leash of restraint. “I’ve got to get out and get under,” he declared. “You can’t expect me to sit still and watch my barkentine go upon the rocks. Here’s where we start something. Get into ‘em, Schepps! Begin doing things! We’ll back you up, for in onion there is strength.”

Schepps led off with a hit, and immediately the Wind Jammers, encouraged by Wiley, leaped out from the bench, dancing wildly and tossing the bats into the air. Locke smiled as he watched them. He had seen Big League teams do the same thing in an effort to drive away the jinx and break a streak of bad luck. But although Lefty smiled, he was not wholly happy.

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“If Jones is a quince,” he thought, “I’ve wasted my time trying to brace up our pitching staff. Even Mit Skullen will have the laugh on me.”

His anxiety had led him to come straight from New York to Vienna, without stopping at Fernandon. He had sent a message to Janet telling her that he would be home the following day.

The Wind Jammers kept after the local twirler, and succeeded in pounding two men round to the registry station. Then Wiley did some wigwagging to Jones, and the gloomy mute nodded assurance. After which he walked out and fanned three batters in a row.

“You see, Lefty!” exulted the Marine Marvel. “That’s what he needs. Give him proper encouragement, and he’s there with the damsons.”

“Temperamental or yellow, which?” speculated the southpaw. “Either sort of a pitcher is worthless in pinches.”

The visitors failed to continue their hitting streak in the seventh. Whether or not Jones was disheartened by this, he let down in the last half of the inning, and Vienna added another score, Wiley’s warnings having no impression upon them. Nor did the mute show any remarkable form in the remainder of the game, which terminated with the score six to four in favor of the locals.

193

“The old jinx is still with us,” lamented the dejected manager of the Wind Jammers. “Wouldn’t it congeal your pedal extremities!”

“It is enough to give one cold feet,” admitted Locke. “But with Jones doing any real pitching to-day four tallies would have been sufficient for you.”

Picking up his overcoat and traveling bag, he started to follow the well-satisfied crowd from the field. As he approached the gate, Mit Skullen stood up on the bleachers and singled him out. Mit’s face wore a leering grin.

“You’re welcome to that lemon, Locke!” he cried. “I wouldn’t take him now for a gift. You’ve got stung good and proper.”

Lefty walked on without replying.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALL WRONG

194

When Locke reached Fernandon, he found, as he expected, a furious message from Weegman awaiting him. In it he was savagely reprimanded, and warned under no circumstances to make any further deals without consulting Collier’s private secretary. He was also commanded to report at the office of the Blue Stockings baseball club without unnecessary delay.

Lefty merely smiled over this, but he did not smile over a long telegram from Franklin Parlme, stating that he had not seen Virginia Collier nor heard anything further from her. Parlme averred that he could not believe Virginia was in New York; he expressed the conviction that Locke had not seen her in the limousine with Bailey Weegman, but had been deceived by a resemblance. But if she were not in New York, where was she? And why had he received no word from her?

Janet watched Lefty frowning and biting his lip over Parlme’s message. Her own face showed the anxiety she felt.

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"What do you think?" she asked. "It doesn't seem possible that Virginia could have been with that man, as you thought. You must have been mistaken."

He shook his head. "I'm positive, Janet. I would be willing to wager anything that I made no mistake."

"Then what does it mean? I can't imagine Virginia being in New York without letting Frank know."

"It's got me guessing," Locke admitted. "There's a snarl that needs to be untangled."

She grabbed his arm. "You don't suppose—"

"What?" he asked, as she hesitated.

"You don't suppose anything terrible could have happened to Virginia? Perhaps that villain has carried her off—shut her up somewhere! Perhaps she is helpless in his power this minute. He may be trying to force her into marrying him."

Lefty laughed. "That sounds too much like a dime novel, my dear. Scoundrel though he is, Weegman would scarcely have the nerve to try anything like that with the daughter of Charles Collier. That's not the answer."

"But something's wrong," insisted Janet.

"No doubt about that," her husband replied. "A lot of things seem to be wrong. Somebody is dealing the cards under the table."

"I know," said Janet, "that Virginia didn't care for Mr. Weegman, and the more her father sought to influence her the less she thought of him. She was proud of Franklin because he had proved his business ability, and she thought Mr. Collier would give in soon. But I can't understand why she stopped writing to me. She hasn't written since arriving on this side."

"We're not getting anywhere by speculating like this," said Lefty. "Can you be ready to go North with me to-morrow?"

"You are going back so soon?"

"Just as soon as we can start. I'm thinking I ought to have remained there. I only came South at all in order to make sure of Mysterious Jones, and now it looks as though I wasted both time and money by doing so. Perhaps I would have been better off if Skullen had succeeded in getting Jones away from me."

"But the cottage—our lease runs another full month."

"It can't be helped. We'll have to pay the rental and give it up."

"And your arm—you thought another month down here might give you time to work it back into condition."

"I've got plenty to worry about besides my arm. I've been told plainly that I've been picked to be the goat by a set of scoundrels who are trying to put over a dirty piece of work, and, if I fool them, I'll have to do it with my head, not my arm. I'm going to stake everything on my ability to put the kibosh on their crooked game, and to stand any chance of succeeding I must be on the field of battle. So we must leave Fernandon to-morrow, my dear."

To accomplish this necessitated no small amount of hustling, but Janet did her part. With the assistance of her maid and a colored man, the work was speedily done. There were tears in Janet's eyes when she looked back at the deserted little cottage, as they drove away in a carriage to catch the train.

"It has been pleasant here," she said. "I'll never forget it. We were so quiet and so happy. Now, somehow, I have a feeling that there's nothing but trouble ahead of us. You've taken a big contract, Phil."

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

She looked up at him and smiled proudly. "Not a bit. You are not the sort of man who fails. I know you'll win out."

His cheeks glowed and a light leaped into his eyes. "After hearing you say that, I couldn't fail, Janet, dear," he said quietly but earnestly. "It's going to be some fight, but let it come—I'm ready."

The journey northward was uneventful. Locke had wired both Kennedy and Parlmees when he would arrive in New York, asking them to meet him at the Great Eastern. He did not stop off at the home town of the Blue Stockings, choosing to disregard for the present Weegman's imperative order for him to report at once at the office of the club. By mail he had formally notified the secretary of the club of the trade with Frazer and the purchase of Mysterious Jones, directing that checks be sent immediately to the manager of the Wolves and to Cap'n Wiley. He had done this as a matter of formality, but he felt sure that Weegman would interfere and hold up the payments, even though they could, sooner or later, be legally enforced. Delay matters as he might, the rascal could not bring about the repudiation of business deals entered into by the properly authorized manager of the team. Locke hoped to have the situation well in hand before he should find it necessary to beard the lion in all his fury. The showdown must come before long, but ere that time the southpaw hoped to fill his hand on the draw.

When he had sent out the players' contracts from Indianapolis he had instructed the men, after

signing, to mail them directly to him in New York. He had made this request emphatic, warning each man not to return his signed contract to the office of the Blue Stockings. He had Kennedy to thank for suggesting this procedure.

"If the contracts go back to the club office," old Jack had said, "Weegman may get hold of them and hold out on you. That would leave you in the dark; you wouldn't know who had signed up and who hadn't, and so you couldn't tell where you stood. It would keep you muddled so you wouldn't know what holes were left to be plugged. If you undertook to find out how the land lay by wiring inquiries to the players, you'd make them uneasy, and set them wondering what was doing. Some of them might even try belated dickering with the Feds, and, while you could hold them by law, it would complicate things still more. If the newspapers got wise and printed things, the stock of the club would slump still more, which would help the dirty bunch that's trying to knock the bottom out of it."

Beyond question, Kennedy was foxy and farseeing, and Locke looked forward expectantly to another heart-to-heart talk with the old man at the Great Eastern.

A big bundle of mail was delivered to Lefty after he registered at the hotel. Immediately on reaching his rooms he made haste to open the letters. 200

"Look, Janet!" he cried exultantly, after he had torn open envelope after envelope. "Here are the contracts—Grant, Welsh, Hyland, Savage, Dillon, Reilley, and Lumley all have signed, as well as the youngsters who didn't attract special attention from the Feds. Not a man lost that the outlaws hadn't gobbled up before Weegman so kindly forced the management upon me. We've got the makings of a real team left. Some of the deadwood has been cleared away, that's all."

With scarcely an exception, the players had sent, along with their contracts, brief, friendly letters congratulating Locke and expressing confidence in his ability to manage the Blue Stockings successfully. He had won the regard of them all; in some cases that regard fell little short of genuine affection. With him as their leader they would fight with fresh spirit and loyalty.

"It's fine, Lefty!" exclaimed Janet, as she read some of those cheery letters. "There was a time when I could not have believed professional ball players were such a fine lot of men."

"I might have had some doubts myself before I was associated with them," he admitted; "but experience has taught me that they measure up in manhood as well as any other class. Of course, black sheep may be found in every business." 201

As he spoke, he hurriedly opened a letter that had just attracted his attention among those remaining. He read it aloud:

MY DEAR HAZELTON: I am writing in haste before sailing for Liverpool on the *Northumberland*. As I thought, you were wrong about having seen Virginia in New York. She is in London, and in trouble. I've had a cablegram from her which, however, explains very little. She needs me, and I am going to her at once. If you should wish to communicate with me, my address will be the Cecil. As I know that both you and Mrs. Hazelton feel some anxiety about Virginia, I shall let you hear from me as soon as I have any news.

Wishing you the success and good fortune you deserve as a baseball manager, I remain,
sincerely yours, FRANKLIN PARLMEE.

When he had finished reading, he stood staring at the letter in surprise.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

202

"Well, now, what do you know about that?" cried Lefty. "Sailed for Liverpool! The man's crazy!"

"But he says he has had a cable message from Virginia," said Janet. "She is in trouble in London. You were mistaken."

"Was I?" queried the southpaw, as if not yet convinced.

"You must have been. All along I have thought it likely, but you persisted—"

"I saw her distinctly in that passing limousine, which was brightly lighted. True, I obtained only one passing glance at her, but it was enough to satisfy me."

"You are so persistent, Phil! That's your one fault; when you think you're right, all the argument and proof in the world cannot change you."

"In short, I'm set as a mule," he admitted, smiling. "Well, there are worse faults. A mistake may prove costly or humiliating to an obstinate person who persists in his error, but, when he is right, such a person is pretty well qualified to win over all opposition. If I did not see Virginia Collier in that car, she has a perfect double in New York. I have great confidence in the reliability of my eyes." 203

Janet, however, thoroughly convinced that her husband had been deceived by a resemblance, made no reply.

Lefty had looked for some word from Kennedy, but had found nothing from him in his bundle of mail. It was possible, of course, that old Jack had found it inconvenient to make the trip to New York just then; but, naturally, if he could not come on he would have let Locke know.

Lefty and Janet had not dined on the train, preferring to do so after reaching their destination. As they were passing the desk on their way to the dining room, Locke stopped short, staring at the back of a slender, well-dressed young man who was talking to one of the clerks. Then the southpaw sprang forward and clapped a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Jack Stillman!" he exclaimed impulsively.

The man turned quickly.

"If it isn't Lefty Locke!" he cried, grabbing the pitcher's hand. "And you're the one man I've been palpitating to get hold of. You're like the nimble flea. But I've got you now!"

"Murder!" said the southpaw. "My joy at spotting you caused me to forget. I should have passed you by, old man. For the moment I completely forgot your profession, and your knack of digging a column or so of sacred secrets out of any old ball player who knows anything he shouldn't tell."

204

Stillman was the baseball man of the *Blade*, a newspaper with a confirmed habit of putting over scoops. With the exception of Phil Chatterton, who was more of a special writer than reporter, Stillman was almost universally acknowledged to be the best informed pen pusher who made a specialty of dealing with the national game. He possessed an almost uncanny intuition, and was credited with the faculty of getting wise in advance to most of the big happenings in the baseball world.

"So you would have ducked me, would you?" said the reporter reprovingly. "Well, I didn't think that of you!"

"I believe I should, if I'd stopped to figure out the proper play in advance," confessed Lefty. "I don't care to do much talking for the papers-at present."

"Hang you for an ungrateful reprobate!" exclaimed Stillman, with a touch of earnestness, although he continued to laugh. "Why, I made you, son! At least, I'm going to claim the credit. When you first emerged from the tangled undergrowth I picked you for a winner and persistently boosted you. I gave you fifty thousand dollars' worth of free advertising."

205

"And made my path the harder to climb by getting the fans keyed up to look for a full-fledged wonder. After all that puffing, if I'd fallen down in my first game, Rube Marquard's year or two of sojourning on the bench would have looked like a brief breathing spell compared to what would have probably happened to me."

"But you didn't fall down. I told them you wouldn't, and you didn't. Let the other fellows tout the failures; I pick the winners."

"Modest as ever, I see," said Locke. "Here's Mrs. Hazelton waiting. We're just going to have a late dinner. Won't you join us?"

Janet knew Stillman well, and she shook hands with him. "Mrs. Hazelton!" he said, smiling. "By Jove! I looked round to see who you meant when you said that, Lefty. Somehow I've never yet quite got used to the fact that your honest-and-truly name isn't Locke. I'll gladly join you at dinner, but a cup of coffee is all I care for, as I dined a little while ago. Shan't want anything more before two or three o'clock in the morning, when I'm likely to stray into John's, where the night owls gather."

When they had seated themselves at a table in the almost deserted dining room, Lefty warned Janet.

206

"Be careful what you say before him, my dear," he said. "He's looking for copy every minute that he's awake, and nobody knows when he sleeps."

Stillman became serious. "Locke," he said, "I've never yet betrayed a confidence. Oh, yes, I'm a reporter! But, all the same, I have a method of getting my copy in a decent fashion. My friends don't have to be afraid of me, and close up like clams; you should know that."

"I do," declared the southpaw promptly. "I didn't think you were going to take me quite so seriously. You have been a square friend to me, Jack."

"Then don't be afraid to talk. I'll publish only what you're willing I should. You can tell me what that is. And if you've seen the *Blade* right along you must be aware that it's the one paper that hasn't taken a little poke at you since you were tagged to manage the Blue Stockings. Nevertheless, here to your face I'm going to say that I'm afraid you've bitten off more than you can chew."

Lefty shrugged his shoulders. "As to that, time will tell. For once your judgment may be at fault."

"I don't mean that you couldn't manage the team successfully if you were given a half-decent show," the reporter hastened to make clear. "I think you could. But I'm afraid you're going to find yourself in a mess that no man living could crawl out of with credit to himself."

207

The southpaw gave the waiter the order. Then he turned to Stillman.

"I thought I might hear something new from you, Jack," he said, "but you're singing the same old song. To be frank with you, it's getting a bit tiresome. If I were dull enough not to know I'd been picked for a fall guy, I could have obtained an inkling of it from the newspapers. It's plain every

baseball scribe knows the fact that there's a put-up job, although none of them has had the nerve to come out flat and say so."

"They've said all they really dared to—without absolute proof of a conspiracy. If you know so much, take my advice, hand me the proof, and give me permission to publish it. But it must be real proof."

"I can't do it yet. Perhaps, when the time comes, I'll pass you what you're asking for. Just now, considering your statement that you never double cross a friend, I'm going to talk freely and tell you how much I know."

Sipping his coffee, Stillman listened to Locke's story. That there was sufficient interest in it the attention of the reporter attested. Janet watched the newspaper man closely, and once or twice she caught the flicker of an incredulous smile that passed over his face, giving her the impression that Stillman had a notion that there were holes in Lefty's narrative.

208

"Do you mind if I smoke?" asked the reporter, when dinner was over, and the dessert had been placed on the table.

Having received Janet's permission, Stillman lit a cigarette, and for a few moments said nothing, being apparently engrossed with his thoughts.

Presently he said: "I wonder."

"Wonder what?" Lefty wanted to know. "What I've told you is the straight fact. Weegman's the crook. Kennedy knew it. I knew it when I took the position of manager. Garrity's behind Weegman. What ails Collier, and why he was crazy enough to run away and bury himself while his team was wrecked, is the unexplained part of the mystery. But if we can block Weegman we may be able to put the whole game on the fritz."

"I wonder," repeated Stillman, letting the smoke curl from his mouth.

Locke felt a touch of irritation. "What are you wondering over? I've talked; now I'm ready to listen."

209

The reporter gave Locke a steady look. "Evidently the possibility hasn't occurred to you that you may not even suspect the real crook who is at the bottom of the affair."

"Weegman conceived it," replied Lefty. "He knew Garrity's reputation. He was sure Garrity would jump at the chance to help, and to grab a fat thing at the same time, by stepping in and gobbling the Stockings when the moment came. Of course, Weegman will get his, for without his undermining work in our camp the thing couldn't be pulled off. And Weegman's looking to cop the big chief's daughter when he gets the chief pinched just where he wants him."

"Wheels within wheels," said Stillman, "and Weegman only one of the smallest of them. He's one of those egotistical scoundrels who can easily be flattered and fooled into doing scurvy work for a keener mind."

"You mean Garrity?"

"I wasn't thinking of him when I spoke."

"Then who—"

"I had a man named Parlme in mind," stated the reporter.

CHAPTER XXV HIDDEN TRACKS

210

His lips parted, his eyes wide and incredulous, Locke sat up straight on his chair and stared at Stillman. Janet, who had been listening attentively, gave a little cry, and leaned forward, one slim, protesting hand uplifted. The reporter drew his case from his pocket and lit another cigarette.

Presently Lefty found his voice. "You're crazy, Jack!" he declared resentfully.

"Am I?" inquired Stillman.

"Oh, it's impossible!" exclaimed Janet.

"Absolutely ridiculous!" affirmed the southpaw.

"Very likely it seems so to you both," admitted the newspaper man, his calm and confident manner proclaiming his own settled conviction. "I listened to Lefty's story, and I know he's wise to only a small part of what's been going on."

"But Parlme—Oh, it's too preposterous! For once in your career, at least, you're way off your trolley, Jack."

"Prove it to me."

"Why, it isn't necessary. Franklin Parlme is a white man, as square as there ever was, and as honest as the day is long."

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"There are short days in midwinter."

"But his object—he couldn't have an object, even if he were scoundrel enough to contemplate such a thing."

"Couldn't he?" asked Stillman, in that odd, enigmatical way of his. "Why not?"

"Why, he's practically engaged to Virginia Collier."

"But without the consent of her father."

"Yes, but—"

"Bailey Weegman is said to have a great liking for Miss Collier. It was your theory that part of his object in seeking to wreck the Blue Stockings was to get old man Collier in a tight place and force his hand. Why couldn't Parlmeem make the same sort of a play?"

The persistence of the reporter began to irritate Locke, who felt his blood growing hot. Was his life beginning to tell on Stillman? Was it possible the pace he had traveled had begun to weaken his naturally keen judgment?

"Even if Parlmeem had conceived such a foolish scheme, he was in no position to carry it out, Jack. On the other hand, Weegman was. Furthermore, it's perfectly impossible to imagine Weegman acting as the tool and assistant of his rival, whom he hates bitterly. Forget it!"

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Unmoved, Stillman shook his head. "Didn't I say that Weegman was an egotistical duff, and an easy mark? He is naturally a rascal, and he thinks himself very clever, and so is just the sort to fall for a still cleverer rascal."

Janet's cheeks were hot and her eyes full of resentful anger. It was difficult for her to sit there and hear Parlmeem maligned, and she was confident that that was what she was doing. She could not remain quiet.

"I know Frank Parlmeem, Mr. Stillman," she asserted, "and Lefty is right about him. There's not a squarer man living."

"How is it possible for Parlmeem to use Weegman as a tool?" asked Locke.

"Through Garrity," answered the reporter without hesitation.

"But I don't see—"

Stillman leaned forward. "Listen: I am not at liberty to disclose the sources of my information, but it has come to me that this idea of wrecking the Blue Stockings originated in Parlmeem's brain. He saw himself losing out in the fight for Virginia Collier, and he became desperate. Conditions were ripe. Collier had hit the toboggan, financially and otherwise. A man of considerable strength of will, he had begun to break down. Parlmeem knew of his plan to go abroad for his health, and of the arrangement to leave Bailey Weegman in charge of affairs. Collier had a great deal of confidence in Weegman's ability, and this would now be put to the test. If Weegman should make a grand failure, as Parlmeem intended he should, Collier would lose all faith in him; and probably, in his disappointment, he would hand him the g. b. That, above all things, was most to be desired by Parlmeem, as it would get out of the way the rival who threatened to defeat him. How to put the thing across was the question. I am willing to give Parlmeem the credit of a long-headed piece of work. He knew Weegman must be kept in the dark, must never be permitted to suspect that he was being used as a tool by his hated enemy."

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"It sounds altogether too impossible," said Locke. But, to his annoyance, in spite of his persistently expressed faith, a shadowy uncertainty, a tiny, nagging doubt, was creeping into his mind. Stillman seemed so absolutely confident of his ground.

"Through his long association with Miss Collier," the reporter pursued calmly, "Parlmeem had learned much about inside conditions in baseball. He had plenty of opportunities to get at things entirely hidden from, or merely suspected by, the general public. He knew Garrity was a grasping scoundrel, who had long regarded the Blue Stockings with a covetous eye, and that, being utterly unscrupulous, he would do anything, as long as he could keep in the background, to break Collier's grip and get his own soiled paws on the property. Therefore, Garrity was the man to deal with, and to Garrity Parlmeem went. They met under cover in Chicago, and the deal was fixed up between them. Then Garrity got at Weegman, the real stool pigeon and the fall guy of the whole plot."

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Locke was listening without protest now. In spite of his desire not to believe, Stillman's theory seemed possible; he would not yet admit, even to himself, that it was probable. Janet, too, was silent. The color had left her face, and beneath the table her hands were tightly clenched.

"Weegman was just ass enough to fall for it," continued Stillman contemptuously. "What Garrity promised him I can't say, but certainly it must have been a satisfactory percentage of the loot—maybe an interest in the team when Garrity got control; and Weegman would sell his soul for money. The moment Collier was out of the way he got to work. You know as well as I do what success he's had. In order to cover his tracks as far as possible, he has picked you for the goat, and he'll try to shunt all the blame on you."

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Lefty's face was grim. He was endeavoring to look at the matter fairly and without bias. To himself he was compelled to admit that his knowledge of Parlmeem had been obtained through casual association with the man, not through business dealings, and in no small degree, he, as well as Janet, had doubtless been influenced by the sentiments of Virginia Collier. A girl in love

may be easily deceived; many girls, blinded by their own infatuation, have made heroes of thoroughbred scoundrels. It was practically impossible, however, for Locke to picture Parlme as a scoundrel.

"You have made a statement, Jack," he said, "without offering a particle of corroborating proof. How do you know all this to be true?"

"I have the word of a man I trust that Parlme and Garrity had that secret meeting in Chicago, just as I have stated. A few days ago Parlme made a flying trip to Indianapolis, and--"

"I know that," interrupted Lefty. "I was in Indianapolis at the time. I met him there and had a brief talk with him."

"On his way back," resumed Stillman, "he stopped off at Cleveland to see Garrity, who happened to be in that city."

"How do you know that?"

"My own business chanced to call me out to Cleveland at that time, and I saw Parlme and Garrity together at the American House."

Locke took a long breath, recalling the fact that Parlme, although professing to be in great haste when in Indianapolis, had not returned to his New York office as soon as expected.

"That may have been an accidental meeting," said the southpaw. "Your proof has holes in it."

The reporter lighted a fresh cigarette. "How does it happen," he asked, "that Parlme is buying up all the small blocks of the club stock that he can get hold of?"

Lefty started as if pricked by the point of a knife. Parlme, an automobile salesman, a man who had found it necessary to get out and show that he could make good in the business world, buying the stock of the club!

"Is he?" asked the pitcher.

"He is," asserted Stillman positively. "I know of three lots that he has purchased, and in each instance he has paid a little more than it was supposed to be worth."

"He-he may have bought it as an investment," faltered Janet.

The reporter smiled at her. "As far as I can learn, Franklin Parlme is not situated, financially, to invest much money in stock of any kind. With his stock depreciating, and bound to go lower in value, he would be a chump to purchase it as an investment. The man who pays more than its market value in order to get hold of it knows something about the doings behind the scenes that is not known to the general public. Apparently that man is Parlme. Who's furnishing him the money to buy the stock? My own guess is that it is the man who's looking to get control of the club, and that man is Garrity."

Still Janet protested that it was impossible, but she looked questioningly at Lefty, the doubt that she was fighting against was now beginning to creep into her eyes.

"Parlme," said the southpaw, "has gone to Europe. I have a message from him stating that he would sail on the *Northumberland*. If he's behind the plot to wreck the Blue Stockings, why should he leave the field of action at this time?"

"If I've got his number," returned Stillman, "he's a liar in various ways. Perhaps he has sailed for Europe; perhaps he hasn't. His message may be nothing more than a little dust for your eyes. But if he has sailed, there's only one answer to that."

"Out with it!" urged Locke. "Of course, you think it another move in the rotten game?"

"Sure as death and taxes. He believes the time is ripe to get at Collier. He's gone across to get at him and twist the control of the club out of his hands. Probably he'll appear before Collier in the guise of a friend anxious to save him from complete financial disaster. He's got just about enough time to make the trip comfortably, get that business through with, and return before the regular meeting of the league magnates here in New York. Then, at the meeting, Tom Garrity will bob up serenely as the real owner of the Blue Stockings."

CHAPTER XXVI

NOT MUCH SHOW

Tired out, Janet went to bed shortly after Stillman left, but Locke, knowing he could not sleep, sat up to think the situation over. The difficulties and problems of his own position seemed greater than ever. If the plot was as deep and intricate as the reporter believed, and if the men behind it were moving with haste and certainty to the accomplishment of their designs, there seemed scarcely a ghost of a chance for him, practically alone and unaided, to block them.

For Lefty now felt that, in a way, he was standing alone. Even Kennedy, having no power, could do little more than offer advice. And where was Kennedy?

The southpaw had fancied that he would be given more time to muster his opposing forces for the

battle. He had even imagined, at first, that the man he would need to contend against and defeat was Weegman. But now Weegman, the blind tool of craftier creatures, looked insignificant and weak. In order to defeat him it would be necessary to strike higher.

How was he to strike? That was the question. Locke had suggested to Stillman complete exposure of the plot by newspaper publicity. And right there the reporter, who had seemed so confident of his ground, had betrayed that, after his usual method, he was working by intuition, and had no positive and unassailable verification of his conclusions. It would not do for his paper to charge criminal conspiracy without proper evidence to back up such an indictment.

Recalling this, Lefty remembered that Stillman, having heard all the southpaw could tell, had ended by giving his own theory, and had offered proof to substantiate it. And then he had been compelled to acknowledge that the proof he had to offer was not sound enough to base exposure and open action upon.

If Stillman were right, doubtless Parlmees had gone abroad with full knowledge of Charles Collier's whereabouts. That knowledge being denied Lefty, he could not warn Collier, and the plot would be carried through as arranged. Then, as the reporter had predicted, at the annual meeting of the magnates, shortly to be held, Garrity would appear as owner of the Blue Stockings. When that happened, the fight would be over, and the conspirators would be triumphant.

With the door to Janet's chamber closed, Locke walked the floor, striving for a clear conception of what ought to be done. He felt like a man bound hand and foot. Of course, he could go on with his project to strengthen the team, but the harvest of his success would be reaped by the plotters, if they, too, were successful. There was little uncertainty about what would happen to him, for he knew that his conscience would not permit him to become an understrapper for Garrity. He had left Fernandon with courage and high hope to do battle; but now the helplessness of the situation threatened to appall him.

If there were only some way to get into communication with Collier. Again he thought of his somewhat shaken conviction that Virginia was in New York. If that were true, some of her family or friends must know it, and, of course, Virginia would know how to communicate without delay with her father.

With this thought came the conviction that in Virginia lay his only hope. If he had been mistaken, and she were not in the United States, his chance of doing anything to foil the conspirators was not one in a thousand. His work for the morrow was cut out for him; he must learn positively if Charles Collier's daughter was on American soil, and, if so, he must find her.

The telephone rang, and when he answered it he was informed that Kennedy was calling. The faithful old veteran had come, after all! Lefty said that he was to be sent up at once.

"Well, son," said old Jack, as he came in, "how are things moving?"

"None too well," answered Lefty, shaking his hand.

"So?" grunted Kennedy. "I wondered just what was up, and I came right along in answer to your call, but my train was delayed. What are the new developments?"

"Sit down," said Locke, "and I'll tell you. Since I sent you that message I've heard something that's got me guessing—and worried."

"The contracts?" questioned old Jack, sitting down. "The boys signed up, didn't they?"

"Every one of them. That's not the trouble. I've had a talk with Jack Stillman."

"The only reporter I know with a noodle screwed on right," said Kennedy. "His bean's packed with sound sense. When he gets an idea it's generally correct."

"In that case, unless he's made a bobble this time, the situation's worse than we suspected, Jack."

"Give me the dope," urged Kennedy.

The old man listened to Locke without comment, and when Lefty had finished, he sat thoughtfully plucking at his under lip with his thumb and forefinger.

"Well," he said, after a time, "Stillman usually puts them in the groove when he shoots."

"Then you think he's hit it right in this case?"

"I haven't said so. If anybody else had passed this one up, I'd have said it missed the plate by a rod. With Stillman doing the pitching, I'm not so ready to give a decision against him. But you say he finished a lot more confident than he began?"

"Yes. Instead of seeking information, he finished up by giving it."

"Just as though he had talked himself into a settled conviction as he went along?"

"That's it."

"Then we won't accept his statement as fact until he gets some kind of proof, son. You know more about Parlmees than I do, and you've always figured that gent on the level, haven't you?"

"Yes; but I'm compelled to admit that I haven't had sufficient dealings with him to feel certain that my estimation of his character is correct. Furthermore, my first impression was unfavorable."

"First impressions are sometimes the best."

"But at that time, as you know, my judgment could hardly be unprejudiced. It was when Collier first took over the team and I had trouble with Carson, the manager he put in your place. Everything seemed going wrong then."

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A grin broke over Kennedy's face, and he chuckled softly, a reminiscent expression in his keen old eyes.

"Those were some stirring times, boy," he said. "Collier fired me for Al Carson, and Carson made a mess of it. He's managing a dub league team now. He thought he could get along without you, just as Collier reckoned he could dispense with me; but at the finish it was you and me that came back and saved the day for the Stockings. You pitched the game of your life that last day of the season. Now it's up to you to come back again, and I've got a hunch that you will. You'll return, better than ever. You're going to make the wiseacres that think you're down and out look foolish."

Locke shook his head. "Knowing what I do, do you suppose I could do that if Garrity got hold of the team? I wouldn't have the heart to work for that scoundrel. Back in the time we're speaking of, it was Stillman's cleverness that straightened things out. Not another newspaper man got wise to the real situation. With his usual uncanny intuition, he saw through it all, and, as usual, he made no mistake."

"Right you are," admitted old Jack.

"All the more reason to suppose he is right now. We can't dodge that fact. To-morrow I'm going to make every effort to find some method of getting into communication with Charles Collier. It's my only play in this game. If it fails—good night!"

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Again Lefty began pacing the floor; it seemed that he could not wait patiently for the coming day; he was burning with a desire to get to work at once. It had been his purpose to seek Kennedy's advice on other matters, but these now seemed secondary and unimportant for the time being. His talk with Stillman had led him to alter completely his plan of immediate action. To prevent the control of the team from falling into the clutches of the conspirators was now his sole purpose, as the problem of rebuilding it and restoring it to its former strength and prestige could be solved later.

Kennedy sat thinking, plucking at his under lip, as was the old man's habit when perplexed. "Yes, son," he said, after a time, "that's what you're up against. Old P. T. Barnum had a show; but it doesn't look like you have."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SUSPENDED AX

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All the next forenoon, Locke kept the wires hot. He 'phoned and telegraphed to every one he could think of who might be able to give him the information he desired so desperately. He met with one disappointment after another. In each instance the reply came back that both Charles Collier and his daughter were somewhere in Europe, but no one appeared to know just where. If his efforts established anything at all, it seemed to be the fact that Lefty had been mistaken in thinking he had seen Virginia in New York; for if she were there, surely some of these people would know of it. The feeling of helplessness, of fighting against greedy and remorseless forces too strong for him to checkmate, pressed upon him heavily.

It was a little after noon when he called the office of the *Blade*. He wanted to talk to Stillman again. If anybody in New York could find a person wanted, the reporter was the man to do it, and Locke believed that for friendship's sake Stillman would attempt it.

Near the telephone switchboard in the hotel were two long shelves, situated a little distance apart, at which patrons could consult the different directories. At one of these, several persons were looking up numbers, so Locke took his book to the other shelf and found the call for the editorial rooms of the *Blade*. A man at the next shelf turned, saw the pitcher, and listened when Lefty gave the number to the operator. Instead of giving his own number, which he had found, the man noted down the southpaw's call on a card. It was the fourth time during the day that this same man had made a record of a number asked for by Locke.

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Returning the card to his pocket, the man pretended to busy himself again over one of the directories, keeping his back partly turned toward the pitcher. Soon he heard the switchboard girl repeat Lefty's number, and direct him to booth No. 1.

The man closed his book and turned round slowly. The southpaw was disappearing into a booth at the end of one of the rows, and, in closing the door behind him, he unintentionally left it slightly open. The watching man moved quietly forward until he was close to this booth, through the glass of which he could see that Lefty's back was partly turned toward him. There he paused, taking some letters and papers from his pocket and running them over as if searching for something. While appearing to be absorbed in his own affairs, he could hear every word that the pitcher spoke into the receiver.

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Getting the editorial rooms of the *Blade*, Locke asked for Stillman. After a slight delay, he was informed that the reporter was not there. No one could say just when he would be in.

"This is important," stated Lefty; "a matter in which he is greatly interested. I must talk with him as soon as possible. Will you ask him, as soon as he comes in, to call Philip Hazelton at the Great Eastern? Yes, Hazelton; that's right. Why, yes, I'm Lefty Locke. All right; don't fail to tell him immediately he arrives."

The man outside slipped the letters and papers into his pocket, and turned away after the manner of a person who has suddenly decided upon something. He had not walked ten steps, however, before he turned back. The southpaw was paying for the call. The man watched him now without further effort to avoid notice, and when the pitcher turned from the switchboard he stepped forward deliberately to meet him.

"Hello!" said the man in a voice distinctly husky and unpleasant. "How are you, Locke?"

Lefty stopped short and stared. It was Garrity, coarse, complacent, patronizing. The owner of the Rockets grinned, showing the numerous gold fillings in his teeth. His features were large, and his jaw was square and brutal. His clothes were those of a common race-track follower.

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"Quite well, thank you," answered Lefty coldly, thinking of the pleasure it would be to tell Garrity his private opinion of him.

"Seems to me you look worried. I don't wonder, though, considering the job they've handed you. Some job piecing together the tattered remnants, hey? It's going to make you a busy little manager."

"I'm busy now," said the southpaw, moving as if to pass on; but Garrity detained him. "You've got some positions to fill. The Feds got at you hard. Shame to see a team like the Stockings shot to pieces. You've got three or four bad holes, and I'd like to help you."

"You would?"

"Sure. I've got the very lads you need, too—Mundy and Pendexter. Both fast men. They work together like two parts of a machine. Mundy covers the short field like Maranville, and Pendexter sure can play that keystone cushion. They're the boys for you."

"How's it happen you are willing to let go of them?" asked Locke, feeling some curiosity to know what lay behind this particular proposition.

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"Well, this is between us, mind? I'd just about as soon give up an eye as part with either Mundy or Pendexter, but it's easier to lose them than dispense with Pressly, my third sacker. That's been the trouble with my team. Pressly loves Mundy and Pendexter as he loves aconite, and they reciprocate. You know what a feud like that means. It knocks the bottom out of any team. I can't fill Pressly's place, but I've got a couple of youngsters that I can work in at short and second. I'm not going through another season with those three scrapping. You need the very players I'm willing to part with, and there we are."

Locke knew the man was not honest, and that he was holding something up his sleeve. In order to make him show his hand, the southpaw asked:

"What do you want for Mundy and Pendexter?"

Garrity considered for a minute. "Well," he answered slowly, "I'll trade them with you for Spider Grant—and cash."

Lefty stared at him in amazement. Was it possible the man could think he was such a soft mark? He laughed loudly.

"You don't want much, do you, Garrity? The 'and cash' was a capper! Man, I wouldn't trade you Spider Grant for your whole team—and cash!"

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The owner of the Rockets scowled, glaring at Locke, the corners of his thick-lipped mouth drooping.

"Oh, you wouldn't, hey?" he growled huskily. "I suppose you think that's a joke?"

"Not at all; it's serious. I couldn't use the players you offer, anyhow. Mundy does cover the short field like Rabbit Maranville—sometimes; but he's got a yellow streak, and he quits. Pendexter knows how to play second, and at the beginning of last season he hit like old Sockalexix when the Indian first broke into the league. But the pitchers all got wise to his weak spot, close and across the knees, and from a three-hundred-and-sixty batter he slumped into the two-hundred class. You were thinking of asking for waivers on him. Spider Grant—and cash—for that pair! I didn't imagine that even you could think me such a boob."

As he listened, Garrity's face showed his anger; his breath came short and quick; his eyes were blazing with the fury of a wild animal.

"Have you got that all out of your system?" he asked, when Lefty stopped. "You're a wise gazabo, ain't you? You know all about baseball and players and such things! You've got a head bigger than a balloon. But it'll shrink, give it time. It's plain you think you really know how to manage a team. By the middle of the season, and maybe considerable before that, your head will be about the size of a bird shot. And you'll know a lot more then than you do now, believe me!"

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The southpaw laughed in his face. "Don't lose your temper," he advised, "just because you couldn't put a raw one over on me. Go ahead and ask waivers on Pendexter. You'll get mine. I

wouldn't carry him on my team if you agreed to pay his season's salary for me. My trade with Frazer gave you the notion that you could pick another good man off me, and weaken the Stockings still more. You fooled yourself that time, Garrity. Perhaps you'll find out before long that you are fooling yourself in other ways."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll let you guess. But just remember what Bobby Burns said about 'the best-laid plans o' mice and men.'"

With this, Locke passed on, leaving the wrathful owner of the Rockets glaring after him.

"You poor fool!" muttered Garrity. "I'll have you whimpering like a whipped dog before I'm done with you. Your head's liable to roll into the basket before the season opens. When the time comes, I'll lift my finger, and the ax'll fall."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GAGE OF WAR

233

Janet had let some friends know that she was in the city, and had been invited out to a matinée performance at one of the theaters. Lefty urged her to go. "That's better than sitting around the rooms alone," he said, "and I'll be so busy that I can't be with you."

So when, shortly after lunch, her friends appeared in a comfortable limousine, they had little trouble in persuading her to join them.

Kennedy dropped in a little later, and Locke told him of Garrity's proposed trade.

"He sure did pick you for a mark," said the ex-manager. "You handed it to him straight about Mundy and Pendexter. You're going to need a pair of fast boys to stop the holes, but there's better men in the minors than those two. You've got better ones on the reserve list. Besides that, I'm doin' a little free scouting on my own hook. I've got friends scattered all over the country. Whenever an old player, gone to the scraps, has touched me up for a five or a ten, I've stood for the touch, asking him to keep his eyes open for anything good he might run across in the sticks. That way I've got a good deal of inexpensive scouting done for me. Maybe it'll be worth something in this pinch. I'm going to interview an old friend over in Jersey this afternoon."

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"I'm not worrying over players just now," said Lefty. "I'm anxious to get hold of Stillman."

"You'll hear from him in time—and Weegman, too. What Garrity knows Weegman knows, and so he's wise that you're right here. Be ready for him when he shows up."

Kennedy had only just gone when Weegman appeared. He laughed when he saw Locke, but it was an ugly laugh.

"What do you think you're trying to do?" he demanded. "Didn't you get my telegram ordering you to report at the office of the club?"

"Yes."

"Well, why didn't you obey? What did you mean by coming right through without even sending me word?"

"I had immediate business here in New York."

"Business! I had business for you to attend to. You've been doing a lot of things without consulting me. Why didn't you wait until I gave you the contracts for the old players?"

"There had been too much waiting, and time was precious. Kennedy had plenty of blanks, so I got them from him, filled them out, and sent them to the boys without further delay. It was the proper thing to do."

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"Don't tell me what's proper to do! I'll tell you. That was the distinct understanding, and you know it. Sent out the contracts, did you? Well, some of them ought to be coming back by this time."

"They've all come back."

"What?"

"Every one of them. The Federals'll get no more players off us this year."

Weegman choked, and the sound that came from his lips was not a laugh.

"I haven't seen anything of them. They didn't come to the office."

"No, certainly not."

"Certainly not! Then where—where are they?"

"I have them in my pocket."

Lefty said it quietly, not at all disturbed by the wrath of the outraged schemer. It gave him much satisfaction to see Bailey Weegman shake and squirm.

"In your pocket!" spluttered the rascal. "You had them returned to a different address? Confound your crust! How'd you ever have the nerve to do a thing like that? Let's see them. Hand them over!"

Locke made no move to obey. "I think I'll keep them a while," he answered coolly. "I'll deliver them personally to be locked in the club safe."

For a moment it seemed that Weegman would lose all control of himself and attack the southpaw.

"You fool!" he raged. "Do you think you're going to get by with this stuff?"

"I've made a pretty fair start at it."

"So you never meant to stand by the private agreement between us when you signed as manager? That's it, eh?"

"There never was any private agreement between us. I signed to handle the team, but I did not agree to become your puppet."

"You did. You said that--"

"That I understood the conditions you had proposed, but I did not say that I consented to them. I had no intention of letting you dictate to me."

"Fool! Fool!" snarled Weegman. "How long do you think you'll last? And you made that crazy trade with Frazer! Do you know what I've done? Well, I've notified Frazer that the deal was irregular, and won't be recognized by the club. Not a dollar of that five thousand will he ever get."

"You know better than that. The trade was legitimate, and it will stand. Frazer can collect by law. Any other deal that I make will go through, too, whether you are aware of it at the time or not. Until Charles Collier himself takes away my authority, I'm manager of the team with the legal right to carry out my own plans, and I intend to do so. I shall ask no advice from you, and any suggestion you may make I shall look upon with distrust."

They fought it out, eye to eye, and presently Weegman's gaze wavered before that of the unawed southpaw. The man he had sought to make his blind tool was defying him to his face.

"I see your finish!" he declared.

"And I see yours," countered Locke. "You think you're a clever crook. You're merely an instrument in the hands of a bigger and cleverer scoundrel who doesn't care a rap what happens to you if he can put his own miserable scheme over. Your partnership with him will be your ruin, anyhow. If you had half the sense you think you possess, you'd break with him without losing any time."

"What are you talking about? I've only planned to do my best to save a team that has been raided by the Feds. You're killing the last chance for the Blue Stockings."

"Tell it to Sweeny!" exclaimed Lefty. "You're trying to deliver the team into the hands of Tom Garrity. Deny it if you wish, but it isn't necessary to lie. You've played Judas with Collier."

"Be careful! Better take that back!"

Lefty laughed. "I'm ready to add more to it. I haven't told you half what I know. If I were to do so, you'd realize what a dumb fool you have made of yourself. You think you're wise to all that was planned, but you've been let in on only a very little of it. You'll tear your hair when you get a squint at the foundation stone of this neat little conspiracy."

"I-I don't know what you mean."

"That's right, you don't; but you will know in time. You'll be kept in the dark as long as it suits Tom Garrity."

"What's Garrity got to do with it?"

Locke smiled on him pityingly. "Don't be childish, Weegman. That sort of a bluff is too thin. I was wise when I signed to manage the team."

In vain the man stormed, threatened, coaxed, cajoled; he could not bend Lefty in the least, and at last he realized that he had made a big blunder in estimating the character of the southpaw.

"So it's war between us, is it?" he finally asked.

"I have looked for nothing else," answered the pitcher.

Weegman snapped his fingers in Locke's face. "All right!" he cried. "You would have it! Just you wait! You're going to regret it! We'll see how long you last!" And, turning round, he strode away, muttering to himself.

Lefty had defied Weegman. Henceforth it was to be open war, and he was glad of it. What the rascal would attempt to do he did not know, and cared less. It did not seem likely that he could do much, if anything, that he had not already made preparations to do. Of course, he might call Collier into the affair, and that, should it bring the owner of the Blue Stockings back to his own country, was something earnestly to be desired. Could he but get Collier in private for twenty minutes, Locke felt sure he could make him realize that he was the victim of a conspiracy, and that his trusted private secretary had sought to sell him out into the hands of a rival owner.

The telephone rang, and, thinking Stillman was calling at last, he hastened to answer. It was not the reporter's voice that he heard, but he was informed that some one was speaking from the office of the *Blade*, and that, after making a fruitless effort to get Locke on the wire, Stillman had found it necessary to hustle away to keep an important appointment.

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"But where can I find him?" asked the disappointed pitcher. "How can I get hold of him?"

"He wants to talk to you as much as you do to him," was the answer. "Said it was absolutely necessary. That's why he had me call you. Says he has something to tell you, personally and privately. He'll try to be at Mike's saloon, Thompson Street, near Broome, at three o'clock. If you get there first, wait for him. And don't fail to come, for he'll have important information. Got that straight?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right. I've done my duty. Good-by." There was a click, and the wire was silent.

Lefty looked at his watch as he left the phone. It was twenty-two minutes to three.

"Just about time enough to make it comfortably," he decided. "Stillman must be on the track of something."

The subway being convenient, he chose it instead of a taxi, getting off at Spring Street. Five minutes ahead of time, he found Mike's saloon, a somewhat disreputable-looking place when viewed from the exterior. The neighborhood, likewise, seemed sinister. However, a reporter's business, thought Locke, carried him into all sorts of places.

Within the saloon a single patron, who looked like a vagrant, was picking at the crumbs of a sickly free lunch in a dark corner. A husky-looking, red-headed bartender was removing an emptied beer schooner and mopping up the counter. He surveyed the southpaw from head to foot with apparent interest.

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"I'm looking for a man named Stillman who made an appointment to meet me here at three," explained Lefty. "I was to wait for him if I got here first."

"Jack's here," stated the man behind the bar, in a manner that bespoke considerable familiarity with the reporter. "Came in three or four minutes ago. Reckon you're Lefty Locke?"

"That's right."

"He told me you might come round. He's in the back room. Walk right in." The speaker jerked a heavy thumb toward a closed door at the far end of the bar.

At the sound of Locke's name the vagrant, who had been picking at the free lunch, turned to look the famous pitcher over with apparent curiosity and interest.

"Lefty Locke," he mumbled huskily. "Lemme shake han's. Ruther shake han's with Lefty Locke than any man livin'."

Locke pushed past him and placed his hand on the knob of the door. The fellow followed, insisting upon shaking hands, and, as Lefty opened the door, the vagrant staggered, lurched against the pitcher, and thrust him forward, the door closing behind him with the snap of a spring lock.

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It is remarkable how seldom any one ever heeds premonitions. Even as he opened that door, Lefty was aware that ever since the telephone call had come to him some subtle intuition, thus far wholly disregarded, had been seeking to sound a warning. It had caused him to hesitate at last. Too late! The push delivered by the vagrant had pitched him forward into the snare, while the sound of the clicking spring lock notified him that his retreat was cut off.

Through a dirty skylight above another door that probably opened upon a back alley some weak and sickly rays of daylight crept into the room. A single gas jet, suspended from the center of the cracked and smoky ceiling, gave a feeble, flickering light, filling the corners with fluttering shadows. The furniture in the room consisted of a table and a few chairs.

At the table three men were sitting, drinking and smoking. Locke, recovering from the push he had received, stepped back against the closed door, and looked at them.

"Hello!" said Mit Skullen. "Don't hurry away, Lefty. Folks that come in by that door sometimes go out by the other one."

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He was grinning viciously, triumphantly. The look upon his face was one of satisfaction and brutal anticipation, and amply proclaimed his purpose.

Skullen's companions were tough characters, fit associates and abettors of such a man. That they were thugs of the lowest type, who would not hesitate at any act of violence, there could be no question. One looked like a prize fighter who had gone to the bad, his drink-inflamed face and bleary eyes advertising the cause of his downfall. The other had the appearance of a "coke" fiend,

and the criminally bent habitual user of that drug has neither scruples nor fear of consequences.

Locke regarded them in silence. His pulses were throbbing somewhat faster, yet he was cool and self-possessed, and his brain was keenly active. He knew precisely what he was up against. Slipping one hand behind him, he tried the knob of the door; but, as he had expected, the door held fast.

Skullen continued to grin gloatingly, fancying that Locke's inactivity was evidence that he was practically paralyzed by amazement and fear.

"Your friend Stillman was too busy to come," he said, "and so I kept the appointment for him. Maybe I'll do just as well. Anyhow, I'll do-for you!"

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He had risen to his feet, and the light of the flickering gas jet played over his evil face. Lefty flashed another look around, taking in the surroundings. To his ears came the distant, muffled sound of an elevated train rumbling along the trestle. Behind him, in the front of the saloon, all was still. Probably the door leading to the street was now also locked to prevent any one from entering and hearing any disturbance that might take place in the back room. The jaws of the trap held him fast.

"Oh, it ain't any use to think about runnin' away, Lefty," croaked Mit. "Not a chance in the world. I fixed it so's we could have our little settlement without any one buttin' in to bother us. You remember I told you I had a score to settle with you?"

As Locke spoke, his voice was calm and steady. "And you engaged a pair of worthy pals to assist you! You're a brave man, Skullen!"

"Aw, these lads are only here to see fair play, that's all. They won't mix in. They won't have to. Last time we met you reckoned you put it all over me, didn't you? Maybe I ought to thank you for keepin' me from gettin' a rotter on me hands, for that's what you got in Dummy Jones. You're welcome to that piece of cheese."

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The southpaw made no retort. He was measuring his chances against all three of the ruffians, having no doubt that he must soon find himself pitted against such odds.

"Some baseball manager, that's what you are!" scoffed Mit, taking keen delight in prolonging the suspense that he fancied must be getting the nerve of the intended victim. "You're rattlin' around like a buckshot inside a bass drum. A busy little person, you are, but you won't be so busy after I finish with you. You'll find it convenient to take a nice long rest in a hospital."

"You fight a lot with your mouth, Mit," said Locke contemptuously.

"Go ahead an' sail inter him, Skully," urged the ruffian who looked like a broken-down prize fighter. "You been itchin' fer him to show up so you could get inter action. Go to it!"

"Plenty of time, Bill. I enjoy seein' him try to push that door down with his back. Wasn't he a mut to walk right into this? I'm goin' to change the look of his face so that his handsome wife won't know him when she sees him next."

He began to remove his coat, and Lefty knew the time for action had come. For an instant his imagination had sought to unnerve him by presenting a vivid picture of himself as he would appear, battered, bleeding, beaten up, if the trio of thugs carried out their evil design; but he put the vision aside promptly. In cases where a smaller force is compelled to contend with a greater, the advantage is frequently obtained through swift and sudden assault. Knowing this, Locke did not wait to be attacked. He hurled himself forward with the spring of a panther and the force of a catapult.

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CHAPTER XXX

ONE AGAINST THREE

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Skullen, in the act of removing his coat, was caught unprepared. Before he could fling the garment aside Locke was upon him, aiming a well-meant blow for the point of Mit's jaw.

Skullen realized that it was no trifling thing to stop such a blow as that, and he jerked his head aside, as he dropped his coat. The blow caught him glancingly and sent him staggering, upsetting the chair from which he had recently risen. Locke grabbed the edge of the table and pitched it against the ruffian's two companions, who had hastily started to get up. They fell over, with the table on top of them.

Lefty followed up his advantage, and kept right on after Skullen. Uttering a snarl of astonished rage, the latter sought to grapple, but the southpaw knew that he could not afford to waste time in that sort of a struggle. Whatever he did must be done swiftly, effectively, and thoroughly. Delay meant only disaster to him. Avoiding the clutching hands of his antagonist, he struck Mit on the neck, below the ear, staggering him again.

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Skullen had not looked for such a whirlwind assault. He had fancied the trapped man would wait until set upon, and he had believed he would have little trouble in beating Lefty to the full satisfaction of his revengeful heart. He was strong and ponderous, and he could still strike a terrible blow, but years had slowed him down, his lack of exercise had softened his muscles, his

eye had lost its quickness, while indulgence in drink and dissipation had taken the snap and ginger out of him. He had not realized before how much he had deteriorated, but now, witnessing the lightning-like movements of Lefty Locke, he began to understand, and sudden apprehension overcame him.

"Bill! Snuff!" he roared. "Get into it! Get at him, you snails! Soak him!"

His appeal to his companions was an unintentional admission that he suddenly realized he was no match for the man he had attempted to beat. The flickering gaslight had given him a glimpse of a terrible blazing look in Locke's eyes. Once, in the ring, he had seen a look like that in the eyes of an opponent who had apparently gone crazy. And he had been knocked out by him!

Scrambling up from beneath the capsized table, Bill and Snuff responded. Lefty knew that in a moment they would take a hand in the fight, and then the odds would be three against one, and none of the three would hesitate at any brutal methods to smash the one. Once he was beaten down, they would kick and stamp him into insensibility; and later, perhaps, he would be found outside somewhere in the back alley, with broken bones, possibly maimed and disfigured for life.

The knowledge of what would happen to him, if defeated, made him doubly strong and fierce. He endeavored to dispose of Skullen first, believing that by doing so he would have half the battle won.

Skullen's howls to his companions came to an abrupt termination. Like an irresistible engine of destruction, Locke had smashed through the defense of the ruffian, and, reaching him with a terrible blow, sent him spinning and crashing into a corner of the room. At the same instant, Bill, joining in, was met by a back kick in the pit of his stomach, and, with a grunt, he doubled up, clutching at his middle with both hands.

This gave the southpaw a chance to turn on Snuff, who had not, so far, shown any great desire to help his pals. The creature had seemed physically insignificant, sitting at the table, but now, in action, he moved with the quickness of a wild cat, in great contrast to the ponderousness of Skullen. And he had a weapon in his hand—a blackjack!

The southpaw realized that, of his three antagonists, the creature springing at him like a deadly tarantula was the most to be dreaded. Insanity blazed in the fellow's eyes. He struck with the blackjack, and Lefty barely avoided the blow.

Locke snapped out his left foot, and caught the toe of the man plunging past him, sending him spinning to the floor. Snuff's body struck a leg of the overturned table and broke it off short, but the shock of the fall seemed to have absolutely no effect upon him; for he rebounded from the floor like a rubber ball, and was on his feet again in a flash, panting and snarling.

"Get him, Snuff—get him!" urged Skullen, coming up out of the corner where he had been thrown.

Bill, recovering his breath, was straightening up. All three of the thugs would be at the southpaw again in another jiffy. Lefty darted round the table, avoiding the blackjack, but realizing what a small chance he had with his bare hands. He could not keep up the dodging long. Then he saw the broken table leg, and snatched it up. With an upward swing, he landed a blow on Snuff's elbow, breaking his arm. The blackjack flew to the smoky ceiling, and then thudded back to the floor.

Feeling sure he had checked his most dangerous antagonist, Lefty turned, swinging the table leg, and gave Skullen a crack on the shoulder that dropped him to his knees. He had aimed at Mit's head, but the fellow had partially succeeded in dodging the blow.

Another blow, and the cry of alarm that rose to Bill's lips was broken short. Bill went down, knocked senseless.

But Snuff, in spite of his broken arm, was charging again. He was seeking to get at the southpaw with his bare left hand! The pitcher, however, had no compunction, and he beat the madman down instantly.

Groaning and clinging to his injured shoulder, Skullen retreated hastily to the wall, staring in amazement and incomprehension at the breathless but triumphant man he had lured into this trap. In all his experience he had never encountered such a fighter.

There being no one to stop him now, Lefty walked to the door leading into the alley, found the key in the lock and turned it. One backward look he cast at the two figures on the floor and the man who leaned against the wall, clutching at his shoulder.

Policemen seemed to be scarce in that neighborhood, and Locke found one with difficulty. The officer listened incredulously to Lefty's story. "Mike's is a quiet place," he said. "Didn't make a mistake about where this happened, did you? Well, come on; we'll go round there and see about it."

The saloon was open when they reached it. The red-headed bartender was serving beer to an Italian and a Swede. The vagrant had vanished. The man behind the bar listened with a well-simulated air of growing indignation when the policeman questioned him. He glared at the pitcher.

"What are you tryin' to put across, bo?" he demanded fiercely. "You never were in here before in your life. Tryin' to give my place a bad name? Nothin' like what you say ever happened around here. Nice little yarn about bein' decoyed here by some coves that tried to beat you up! Say, officer, is this a holdup?"

"I've told you what he told me," said the policeman.

"In my back room!" raged the barkeeper. "There ain't been nobody in there for the last two hours. Come here an' have a look." He walked to the door and flung it open.

Skullen and his partners were gone. Even the broken table had been removed. There was nothing to indicate that a desperate encounter had taken place there a short time before.

"You cleaned up in a hurry," said Lefty.

At this the barkeeper became still more furious, and was restrained by the officer, who scowled at the pitcher even as he held the other back.

"You don't look like you'd been hitting the pipe, young feller," growled the representative of the law; "but that yarn about being attacked by three men looks funny. Don't notice any marks of the scrap on you. They didn't do you much damage, did they? Say, you must have had a dream!"

Locke saw the utter folly of any attempt to press the matter. "As long as you insist upon looking at it in that way, officer," he returned, with a touch of contempt that he could not repress, "we'll have to let it go at that. But I'll guarantee that there are three men somewhere in this neighborhood who'll have to have various portions of their anatomies patched up by a doctor as the aftermath of that dream."

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CHAPTER XXXI

LIGHT ON A DARK SPOT

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Janet returned from the matinée in a state of great excitement. "She's here!" she cried, bursting in on Lefty. "You were right about it! I've seen her!"

The southpaw gazed in surprise at the flushed face of his charming wife. "You mean—"

"Virginia! I tell you I've seen her!"

"When? Where?"

"As we were leaving the theater. The lobby was crowded, and we were in the back of the jam. Suddenly I saw her over the heads of the people. She was just getting into an auto that was occupied by a handsome woman with snow-white hair. I wasn't mistaken; it was Virginia. I couldn't get to her. I tried to call to her, but she didn't hear me. I'll never say you were mistaken again, Lefty. Somehow you seem always to be right."

Locke scarcely heard these final words. He was thinking rapidly. A sudden ray of hope had struck upon him. Confound it! Where was Stillman? He sprang to the telephone and called the *Blade* office again.

"Jack is the one best bet in this emergency," he said, as he waited for the connections to be made.

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He got the reporter on the wire, and Stillman stated that he had not been in the office ten minutes, and was about to call Lefty. Could he come up to the Great Eastern right away? Sure.

The feeling of depression and helplessness that had threatened to crush Locke began to fall away. The door he had sought, the one door by which there seemed any chance of passing on to success, appeared to be almost within reach of his hand. In her excitement at the theater, Janet had not possessed the presence of mind to call the attention of her friends to the snowy-haired woman, but he knew that she could describe her with some minuteness.

"Stillman knows everybody," Lefty said. "It may be clew enough for him."

There was a rap on the door. A messenger boy appeared with a telegram. Locke ripped it open and read:

Jones sick. Team busted. I'm busted. Signal of distress. How about that five hundred? I knead the dough. Don't shoot! Wire cash. WILEY.

"Trouble in another quarter," muttered Lefty, handing the message over to Janet. "How am I going to send him that money? I can't force Weegman to do it. Wiley has a right to demand it. If I don't come across, he'll have a right to call the deal off."

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"But Jones is sick," said Janet.

"Still it was a square bargain, and I mean to stand by it. Jones is sick. He was sick that day in Vienna; that was what ailed him. He showed flashes of form when he braced up, but he was too ill to brace up long. I've wondered what was the explanation, now I have it. Get him on his feet again, and he'll be all right. I've got to hold my grip on Jones somehow."

Kennedy and Stillman appeared at the Great Eastern together. First, Lefty showed them the message from Cap'n Wiley. Over it the former manager screwed up his face, casting a sharp look at his successor.

"If you can trust this Wiley," he said, "send him two hundred, and tell him to bring Jones north as soon as Jones can travel. Don't worry. Wiley's outfit didn't come under the national agreement,

and Jones' name on a Stockings contract ties him up."

"But without drawing money from the club I haven't the two hundred to spare now. I can't draw."

"I'll fix that. I've got two hundred or more that you can borrow. After the training season opens, you'll pretty soon find out whether or not you've picked a dill pickle in your dummy pitcher."

Janet told Stillman about seeing Virginia Collier, and gave him a fairly minute description of the woman Virginia was with. The reporter smoked a cigarette, and considered.

"I think I can find that lady with the snow-white hair," he said, after a time. "Leave it to me. You'll hear from me just as soon as I have something to tell."

With a promising air of confidence, he took his departure, leaving Kennedy and Locke to attend to the matter of Wiley and Mysterious Jones. Of course, the southpaw told the old manager all about Skullen's attempt at revenge, but he did not do so within the hearing of Janet, whom he did not care to alarm. The veteran chuckled over the result of the encounter in the back room of Mike's saloon.

"Right from the first," he said, "you was picked for something soft and easy. I knew you was a fighter, son, but Weegman and his gang didn't know it. Mebbe they'll begin to guess the fact pretty soon."

A few minutes after eight that evening, Stillman returned to the hotel and found Locke waiting with what patience he could command. The reporter wore a smile, but he declined to answer questions.

"Mrs. James A. Vanderpool's private car is waiting for us at the door," he said. "Bring Mrs. Hazelton, Lefty. We're going to make a call."

"Mrs. Vanderpool? The widow of the traction magnate? Why, what--"

"Now don't waste time! Somebody else can gratify your curiosity a great deal better than I. In fact, I know so little about the facts at the bottom of this queer business that any explanations I'd make would be likely to ball things up."

The magnificent residence of the late James Vanderpool was on upper Fifth Avenue. They were ushered into a splendid reception room. In a few minutes an aristocratic-looking woman with white hair entered, her appearance bringing an involuntary exclamation to Janet's lips.

"It's the very one!" she breathed excitedly, her fingers gripping Lefty's arm. Stillman introduced them to Mrs. Vanderpool, who met them graciously.

"Virginia will be down in a minute or two," said the lady. "For reasons, she has been staying with me since she returned from abroad. I'll let her tell you about it." She regarded Locke with frank interest, yet in a manner that was not at all embarrassing, for it plainly contained a great deal of friendliness. "Virginia has told me much about you," she stated. "It has never before been my good fortune to meet a professional baseball player. My niece is very fond of Mrs. Hazelton."

"Your niece!" exclaimed Lefty.

"Virginia is my niece, although I have scarcely seen her since she was a very small child. Here she is now."

Virginia ran, laughing, to meet Janet. After the manner of girl friends, they hugged and kissed each other.

"Really," said Virginia, "I should give you a good shaking for not answering all my letters!"

"Your letters!" cried Janet. "I've received only two letters from you in goodness knows how long! I answered them; and wrote you a dozen to which I got not a word of reply."

They gazed at each other in blank uncertainty for a minute or two, and every trace of laughter died from Miss Collier's face. Her blue eyes began to flash.

"Then," she said, "our letters were intercepted. I can't remember whether I posted any of mine or not, but I was so worried over father that it is doubtful if I did. I let my maid attend to that. She nearly always brought the mail to me, too. When I obtained positive proof that she was dishonest, I discharged her. Even now it's hard to believe she was so treacherous."

"But why should she intercept our letters? I don't understand, Virginia."

"There has been a dreadful plot to ruin my father. You'll hardly believe it when I tell you. I find it difficult to believe, even now." She shivered, some of the color leaving her face. "It was necessary to cut us off from any true information of what was happening to his business interests. Letters from you might have given me an inkling, Janet, and so they were secured and destroyed before they ever reached my hands. Other letters met the same fate. Mr. Weegman declared he wrote several which I know my father never got."

"Weegman!" exclaimed Locke incredulously. "Why, he--"

"Doctor Dalmers warned Mr. Weegman that father must not be disturbed or excited in the least over business matters. He said such a thing might have a fatal effect on his heart. Still Weegman says he wrote guardedly several times, mildly hinting that things were not going right."

"The liar!" whispered Lefty to himself.

A bit in the background, Jack Stillman was listening with keen interest, thinking what a

sensational special article the truth regarding this affair would make.

"We were surrounded by wretches who had no compunction," declared Virginia Collier. "It was I who first suspected them. My father was too ill, and the doctor kept him under opiates almost all the time, so that his mind was dulled. After I discharged Annette I became suspicious of the nurse. I spoke to Doctor Dalmers about her, but he insisted that she was all right. He insisted too earnestly. I began to watch him without letting him realize I was doing so. Once or twice I found a chance to change father's medicine for harmless powders and clear water, and it seemed to me that he was better than when he took the medicine. He was very weak and ill, but his mind seemed clearer. I kept the medicine away from him for two days in succession, and got an opportunity to talk to him alone. I succeeded in convincing him that the change of climate, the baths, and the stuff the doctor had given him were doing him no good at all. In London there was a physician whom he knew and in whom he had confidence, Doctor Robert Fitzgerald. I urged him to go to Doctor Fitzgerald, but not to tell Doctor Dalmers of his intention, and I begged him to refuse to take any more of Doctor Dalmers' medicine. We were in Luchon, and all the way to London I had to watch like a hawk to keep that medicine from father, but I succeeded, although I became extremely unpopular with Doctor Dalmers. The minute we reached London, I went to Doctor Fitzgerald and told him all that I suspected. Although he could not believe such a thing possible, he accompanied me at once to our hotel. Doctor Dalmers was taken by surprise, for he had not anticipated this move. When I discharged both him and the nurse, he gave me a terrible look. Of course, I could not have carried this through, had not Doctor Fitzgerald been a close friend of my father. Dalmers called Fitzgerald's action unprofessional, and made threats, but we got rid of him."

Despite the fact that she was such a mere slip of a girl, it was evident that she possessed brains and the courage and resourcefulness to use them. Mrs. Vanderpool seemed very proud of her. Lefty expressed his admiration.

"I knew," Virginia continued, "that there must be something behind such a plot. I did not believe Dalmers had put it through merely to bleed my father while keeping him ill. I was worried over the fact that we knew so very little concerning how father's affairs were going over here. What information we could get by cable or otherwise might be unsatisfactory. So I determined to come home and investigate for myself. I got father's consent, and I left him in Doctor Fitzgerald's care. I intended to sail by the *Victoria*, but there was a misunderstanding about accommodations, and I was forced to take a later ship. I find father's affairs involved, and I've sent a statement of conditions as they appear to be."

"Of course," she concluded, smiling a little, "I was greatly relieved to learn from Mr. Weegman that he felt sure he had blocked the contemptible efforts to smash the Blue Stockings. He felt highly elated over signing Lefty Locke as manager."

"Miss Collier," said the pitcher, "did Weegman offer an explanation of the raid on the team? Did he say who was at the bottom of it?"

Instantly a little cloud came to her face, and an expression of regret appeared in her eyes. "Yes," she answered. "He told me. At first I could not believe it."

Stillman leaned forward, listening, his lips slightly parted. Locke turned toward him, but turned back quickly, with another question on his lips. Virginia was speaking again, however.

"I can scarcely believe it now," she said sadly. "It seems too utterly impossible! I can't imagine any one being such a scoundrel—much less him! But Weegman has made sure; he has the proof. Of course, he has told you all about it, Lefty; it was necessary that you should know." Her manner had grown deeply dejected.

"What did Weegman tell you?" asked the southpaw. "Who did he say was responsible for what had happened to the Blue Stockings?"

With an effort the girl answered: "Franklin Parlme!"

CHAPTER XXXII

ONE CHANCE

It was like a staggering blow. While it confirmed Stillman's theory that Parlme was the chief rascal of the conspiracy, it shattered the supposition that Weegman, a blind dupe, wholly unaware of the truth, was being cleverly manipulated as an unconscious tool. The foundation of that hypothesis melted away like sand before hydrolytic force.

Locke turned again and looked at the reporter. The latter, standing like an image of stone, was staring questioningly and incredulously at Virginia Collier. He, too, realized that this confirmation of his belief had brought a portion of the postulation fluttering down like a house of cards, and he was seeking a mental readjustment.

Janet, frozen with lips slightly parted and eyes wide, was aware of it also. She was about to speak impulsively when Lefty detected her and made a repressing gesture.

Miss Collier felt that she knew the reason for the sudden silence that had fallen on every one, and

a faint flush crept back into her cheeks. She appeared to be humiliated and ashamed, as well as sorrowful.

"I understand," she said, in a low tone, "how it must seem to you to hear me say such a thing about Mr. Parlme. I have trusted him. I believed in him, even when my father was losing faith and confidence. I clung to my own faith, and it hasn't been easy to abandon it, even in the face of proof. My conscience or something taunts me occasionally. I-I've cried over it, and I've fought against it. I haven't dared see him since my return—since I found out the truth—for I knew I should listen to him and believe in him in spite of everything. I wanted to face him and accuse him, but Weegman persuaded me to wait. He said it would merely hasten the crash if we let the scoundrels know they were suspected."

"The scoundrels!" exclaimed Locke. "Then he told you that more than one was concerned?"

"He claims that a man named Garrity is operating in conjunction with Franklin Parlme."

Another staggerer. To Virginia, Weegman had accused Garrity. Mutely the southpaw appealed to Stillman. The reporter's forehead was puckered in a puzzled manner; he caught Lefty's glance, and shook his head slowly.

"When did he name Garrity, Miss Collier?" he asked.

"When he called on me to-day—this afternoon," was the answer. "He has been at work trying to get at the truth."

Locke improved the opportunity to whisper in Janet's ear: "Keep still! Don't say a word—now."

Although she did not understand why he wished her to keep silent, she nodded. He had been right in other matters; it was best to let him have his way in this.

"My niece has been very much upset," said Mrs. Vanderpool. "It has practically made her ill. She hasn't felt much like seeing people, and therefore Mr. Weegman's advice to keep quiet was easy to follow."

Weegman had urged Virginia to remain in obscurity, not to let her friends know she was in New York; that was evident. He had convinced her that by doing so she could best assist him in his pretended task of trapping the conspirators. And while she kept quiet, those conspirators were hastening to carry through the work they had planned.

"Miss Collier," said Lefty, "do you think it would be possible for your father to come home at once? Do you think he is strong enough to stand the voyage? If he can do so, he had better come. He should be here now."

"I don't know," she replied.

"Give me his address and let me communicate with him," Locke urged. "He should know something of the truth, at least."

Virginia was persuaded, for Mrs. Vanderpool agreed that it was the best course to pursue. The southpaw was elated; he felt that at last he was getting a grip that would enable him to accomplish something. If he could baffle the rascals now, it would be a feat worth while.

Mrs. Vanderpool was called away to the telephone.

"Auntie has been very kind to me, in spite of her quarrel with father," said Virginia, when the lady had left the room. "They have not spoken to each other for years. It is so ridiculous, so childish, for a brother and sister who have been devoted! Both are stubborn. And yet Aunt Elizabeth is the kindest, gentlest woman in the world. She lost an only daughter, and she says I seem to fill the vacant place. She has made me feel very much at home."

Then she began chatting with Janet about things of mutual interest. Locke joined Stillman, who had walked to the far end of the room.

"This Weegman is either a fool or much cleverer than we thought him," said the reporter swiftly, in a low tone. "I don't believe he's a fool."

"How have you figured it out?" Lefty questioned. "It was a mistake to think him not wise to Parlme. And why, if he is hand in glove with Garrity, did he tell her that Garrity was concerned in the miserable business?"

"He told her that to-day?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he tell her before? Weegman is in town. Have you seen him?"

The pitcher told of his meeting with both Weegman and Garrity, and how he had defied them. Stillman's face cleared a little.

"Look here, Locke, that fellow Weegman will double cross any one. You put him next to the fact that you were wise to Garrity. The whole bunch must know that Collier has fired his crooked doctor. Of course, Dalmers notified them. After talking with you, Weegman began to realize that the whole plot might fall through. He lost no time in beginning to hedge his bets. He's trying to fix it so that he'll fall safe if the business blows up."

"But why did he tell her of Parlme? We thought he didn't know about that."

"I'm not as sure about Parlme as I was," admitted the reporter frankly. "Weegman has been

trying to blacken him to her right along. I'll own up now that it was an anonymous communication that first put me on the track of Parlme. There have been others of the same sort tending to incriminate him. I've wondered where they came from. Now I think I know. Weegman is the answer."

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"By Jove!" exclaimed Lefty. "You believe it was he who directed suspicion toward Parlme in the first place?"

"You've got me. That being the case, instead of being a dupe, this Weegman has put something over that we didn't suspect him of. He's after Collier's daughter, and it would help him if he could turn her against his rival."

Locke's face cleared. His relief was evident.

"This is all speculation," said the reporter hastily. "Don't be too quick to accept it as a settled fact. Parlme's behavior has been suspicious enough to require some explaining from him. Perhaps he can clear it up. We know Weegman has tried to put the Blue Stockings on the blink, and we're dead certain he hasn't knowingly done so as the assistant of Parlme. Now how do you figure on that?"

"Parlme's innocent, as I fancied. Weegman is the chief rascal."

Stillman smiled. "In which case he's beginning to find himself caught in a quicksand, and he's trying to save himself by climbing out over his pal, Garrity. He'll swear he had no finger in it. Garrity won't dare accuse Weegman of being an accomplice, for by doing that he would acknowledge that there was a conspiracy. Weegman is in no danger in that direction of anything further than such private revenge as Garrity may seek to take."

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Lefty turned back and approached Virginia and Janet, addressing the former:

"Miss Collier, I want you to promise me that, for the present, at least, you'll say nothing to Bailey Weegman about having seen and talked with me."

The girl looked surprised. "I was just proposing that Janet should leave the hotel and stay here with me. I know my aunt will approve."

"I approve anything you may wish, my dear," said Mrs. Vanderpool, reëntering the room. "It would give me great pleasure to have Mrs. Hazelton visit us and remain as long as possible."

Locke looked doubtful, for should that arrangement be carried out Janet might easily be led into telling Virginia more than it seemed advisable for her to know at the present time. But Mrs. Vanderpool made her invitation most cordial, and Janet gave him a beseeching glance. He wavered.

"Weegman calls here. If he should--"

Janet's hand fell on his arm. "Trust me," she urged significantly. "You can't hope to keep him long in the dark. For the present, if he calls, I'll not be in evidence. You're so busy that I see very little of you during the day, anyway."

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So he was won over. Janet returned with him to the hotel to gather up the belongings she would need, and Stillman accompanied them. Lefty made his wife understand how desirous it was to keep Weegman blinded as long as possible, explaining that he feared Miss Collier's indignation would lead her into betraying everything should she learn the whole truth regarding the two-faced schemer.

"If you can get Collier home quickly enough, Locke," said Stillman, "there's a chance that you may be able to spike the enemy's guns, even at this late hour."

"I'm going to make a swift play for that chance," returned Lefty.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ONE IN A MILLION

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The clerk of the Great Eastern surveyed with interest the swarthy small man in the bright green suit and the plaid raglan overcoat, who leaned an elbow on the desk and jauntily twirled a light cane, puffing at an excellent Havana cigar.

"Beyond a modicum of a doubt you have me, your excellency," said the stranger. "I'm the real thing, the only and original Cap'n Wiley. It is frequently embarrassing to be encumbered by fame, and my modesty often compels me to travel incog-nit-o; but just now, having a yearning desire to hobnob with my old college chump, Lefty Locke, I am blushingly compelled to reveal my identity. When Lefty learns that I am here he will fly like a bird to greet me. Notify one of yon brass-buttoned minions to inform him of my immediate proximity."

"Mr. Locke is out at present," said the man behind the desk, winking slyly at a fellow clerk; "but if you will leave your card--"

"If one isn't sufficient, I'll leave the whole pack of fifty-two. It is my habit to carry a deck with me for emergencies. Perchance, however, you can tell me when Lefty is liable to return."

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At that moment Locke, coming in, saw the sailor, and hurried forward. The Marine Marvel teetered to meet him, beaming broadly. They shook hands, and Locke drew the sailor toward two vacant chairs.

"Jones?" questioned Lefty as they sat down. "Where is he? How is he?"

"He's right here in this little old burg," was the answer. "Nothing short of his demise could have prevented me from keeping my agreement to deliver him to you. He is on the mend, and it is probable that he'll soon be as frisky and formidable as ever. But I have qualms. I fear greatly that something has happened to cause Jonesy to lose interest in baseball forever and for aye. Were I in his boots, I'd go on one long spree that would reach from here to Hongkong, and even farther. Hold your breath, Lefty, and hold it hard. Jones has come into a modest little fortune of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars or thereabouts."

"Quite a joke!" said the pitcher.

"I don't blame you for doubting me. In your place I'd have made a remark a shade more violent. But the seal of voracity is on my lips. I didn't know it when I saw you last, but at that time he had practically sold his interest in his Alaska possessions. I have stated the sum he received for his share in that pretty bit of property."

"Enough to keep him in pin money for some time," replied Lefty, still skeptical.

"If he could be induced to use it for his own wants he could dodge becoming a pauper for quite a while. But, Lefty, you can't guess what he's going to do with it. Excuse me while I sigh. I have argued and pleaded until my fingers became tongue-tied; but I've failed to move him from his fixed determination. He is going to give every dollar of that money away!"

Of course, Locke thought that Wiley was drawing the long bow, as usual. "I hope he won't overlook his friends when he passes it around," he said, smiling.

"His friends won't get a dollar!" declared Wiley. "He's going to give it to his enemies."

This was too much for the southpaw. "Let's cut the comedy," he urged.

The sailor gave him a chastening look. "It isn't comedy; it's tragedy, Lefty. He believes it his duty. He believes he is bound, as a man of honor, to do it. Listen and I will elucidate. Did you ever hear of the Central Yucatan Rubber Company?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, it was a fraudulent concern that flourished like a green bay tree some seven or eight years ago, and withered like a fragile plant when the government got after it for fraudulent use of the mails. Like many such grafting stock-selling companies, it had a dummy board of officers who appeared to be in control, while the real rogues who were harvesting the coin kept in the background. Jones was president of that company. He believed it to be on the level, and he had invested some of his own money—superficially all he had—in it. When the government got busy, Jones was indicted as the head of the concern. He was thought to be the originator of the scheme. The real crook had fixed it so that he seemed to be one of the innocent victims, and he helped swear Jones into prison. Jones got five years. He served his time."

At last Locke was impressed. He had never seen Wiley so serious. For once, the flippant and superficial manner of the swarthy little man had been discarded; his flamboyant style of speech had been dropped. Ordinarily he gave one the impression that he was gleefully fabricating; now, of a sudden, the listener was convinced that he was hearing the naked truth. It explained the atmosphere of somber sadness, the appearance of brooding over a great injustice, which had infolded the mysterious dumb pitcher of the Wind Jammers. For Jones Lefty felt a throb of genuine sympathy.

"With the unclad eye I can perceive that you get me," the sailor continued. "You can imagine how you would feel if you had been sent to the jug for five years, as punishment for a crime perpetrated by somebody else. What if the one who concocted the scheme and benefited by it swore your liberty away and escaped scot-free himself?"

"It was monstrous!" exclaimed the pitcher.

"Precisely so. In prison Jones took a foolish oath. He registered a vow to pay back every dollar to those who had lost their good money in that fake rubber company. He didn't know how he was going to do it, but he was determined that he would. In a way, they were his enemies, for they had helped prosecute him; the courts had adjudged him guilty, and he felt that he could never hold up his head as an honest man until those who had been defrauded got the last cent of coin back. In some way he must acquire a huge amount of filthy lucre, and acquire it honestly. He dreamed of gold mines. When the prison spat him forth he made his way up into Alaska. There his dream came true, for, with his partners, he located and developed a great mine. They could have sold out a dozen times, but never for a sum that would permit Jones to accomplish his purpose with his share of the price. So he held on. And at last a syndicate made an offer that was sufficient. Jones was notified by his partners. He accepted. But not until the deal was put through and he had the certified check for his interest in his clutches did he breathe a word of it to any one. Then he told me. He was sick, but his success helped cure him. He was eager to hurry North and set into action the machinery for distributing that money to the rubber company's victims. At this very moment he is interviewing a reputable firm of lawyers and giving them instructions to proceed about the work. He can supply a full list of the persons defrauded. They'll get back what they lost, and Jones will find himself poor again—but satisfied."

Lefty's eyes were shining. "In these days of the great American idea of grafting and fraud," he said, "a man with a conscience like Jones' is one in ten thousand."

"Say, rather, one in a million, mate. I have reviled him extemporaneously. I have told him that he is a fool. I'm honest myself-when it's absolutely necessary. But to part with a scandalous sum like two hundred and fifty thousand without being positively compelled to do so-oh, pardon me while I sob!"

"A man with such principles, and Jones' ability to pitch, will not come to grief. He has a job before him with the Blue Stockings."

Wiley shook his head. "Apprehension percheth upon me, Lefty. Jones has accomplished the great purpose of his life. It was what fired him and spurred him on. I regret to elucidate that since that money came to him he has displayed no interest whatever in baseball. When I sought to make him talk about it he wouldn't even wigwag a finger on the subject. Something seems to tell me that he'll never again ascend the mound and shoot the horsehide over the pentagon."

CHAPTER XXXIV

WEEGMAN'S PROPOSAL

For four days Weegman had not troubled Locke, four days during which Lefty sought in vain to get some word from Charles Collier. His cablegrams remained unanswered. At the time when he had felt the most sanguine he seemed to find himself blocked again. He did not seek to delude himself with the belief that silence on the part of the conspirators meant they were inactive. Doubtless they were at work harder than ever. What were they doing? He confessed that he would give a great deal to know.

Then Weegman reappeared. His manner was ingratiating. His chuckle seemed intended to be genial and friendly.

"A private room where we can talk without the slightest chance of being overheard, that's what we want," he said. "Your own room should be all right, as long as your wife is stopping with Miss Collier and her aunt." He knew about that. How long he had known was a question.

Locke felt like turning the rascal down flatly. He was on the verge of doing so when something led him to decide differently. Perhaps a little patience and cleverness would enable him to get an inkling of what the enemy was doing. He took Weegman to his room, and shot the door bolt behind them when they had entered.

"That's right," said Collier's private secretary. "We don't want to be interrupted by anybody. I took a great deal of pains that no one who knew me should see me come here. Garrity mustn't get wise. He ordered me to keep away from you." Laughing, he flung himself down on a chair.

"Garrity!" cried Lefty, astonished at the confession. "Then you admit that you are taking your orders from him?"

"He thinks I am," was the grinning answer. "Perhaps he'll find himself fooled. If you and I can get together, I'm sure he will."

Locke stifled a sense of repulsion. The man was more detestable than ever. It did not appear possible, and yet he still seemed to think that Locke would accept a proposal from him.

"How do you mean?" asked the pitcher, with masterly self-control. "Get together how?"

"I hope you realize you can't do anything alone. The combination against you is too strong, and too much had been done before you began to get wise to the situation. Let me tell you now that I didn't expect this affair would go as far as it has when I entered into it."

The creature was shamelessly acknowledging his participation in the plot, chuckling as he did so. Lefty waited.

"Of course," pursued Weegman, "you've been aware for some time of my unbounded admiration and regard for Miss Collier. The old man favored me, but I couldn't bring her round. To do so, I decided, it would be necessary for me to accomplish a coup. If I could apparently save her father from ruin she might alter her views. Out of gratitude she might marry me. I'm a man who gets what he wants, by hook or crook. Garrity approached me with a scheme. I listened to it. I believed I saw a way to turn that scheme to my own advantage with Virginia. But I'll tell you now that it never was my intention to put Charles Collier wholly on the blink. At that time even I didn't know how badly involved he was."

Even while he told the truth in a way, Weegman was lying in the effort to palliate his act to some degree. His conscience was warped to such an extent that he seemed to believe there could be an excuse for the milder forms of conspiracy and crime. In a bungling way he was actually making a bid for Locke's sympathy.

"You must have known of the dastardly arrangement with a crooked doctor to keep Mr. Collier drugged into apparent illness and detain him in Europe beyond reach of the friends who might tell him, Weegman. Who got to that doctor and bought him up?"

"Not I," was the denial. "I didn't have the money."

"Was it Garrity?"

"Of course. Garrity had something on Dalmers, who was concerned in some mighty shady practices at one time. But he told me that Dalmers was simply going to keep watch of the old man. I didn't know anything about the drugging business. When I found that out I was mad as blazes."

The southpaw fought to prevent his lips from curling with scorn, and to suppress a look of triumph in his eyes. "What's your proposition to me, Weegman?"

The self-acknowledged rascal seemed to hesitate. "You're sure no one can hear us?" he asked, his eyes roving around the room.

"You can see that we're quite alone."

Weegman drummed nervously on the arm of his chair. "I'm sorry this thing has gone so far," he protested. "I didn't look for it to, at first. I got involved and couldn't back out. In fact, Garrity threatened me when I showed signs of holding back. That," he declared, with an attempt at indignant resentment, "made me sore. Without my help in the beginning he never could have done a thing. Now he thinks he's got me foul, he's going to gobble everything. We'll see about that! Perhaps it isn't too late to stop him. Maybe we can do it, you and I. I'd like to show him."

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So the rascals had quarreled over the division of the spoils, as rascals so often do. And now one of them was ready to betray the other, if he could do so without disaster to himself. At the same time, he hoped to make an alliance with Lefty by which he might reap some actual benefit from his underhanded work. Suddenly Locke thought of another man who had been suspected of complicity.

"How about Parlme?" he asked. "Where does he fit in? Did Garrity send him over the pond to wrench the control of the Blue Stockings from Collier?"

"I don't know what Garrity has been doing with Parlme," Weegman confessed. "It was natural that I should want to turn Virginia against Parlme, but I swear I didn't know he was in this thing when I got the idea of making her believe he was. That was an inspiration that came to me all of a sudden. I had to keep her away from him. I faked up some evidence. She refused to believe at first. Then, by Jove, I found out that Garrity and Parlme were really up to something. They've had dealings."

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Lefty's wrath, which had bounded high for a moment, sank heavily. After all, could it be true that two cleverer scoundrels had combined to work Weegman as a dupe? Had the confirmation of this fact helped Weegman to make up his mind to go back on Garrity? Was it not possible that this was the real cause of the quarrel between the worthy pair?

The southpaw continued to lead the other on. "What is Garrity's scheme? What has he told you that he proposed to do?"

"Unless Collier receives outside assistance, Garrity's got him cornered. Collier has met reverses generally. Garrity has got hold of a certain amount of Blue Stocking stock. Collier still holds enough to keep the balance of power, but he won't hold it long. If he tries to his interest in the Northern Can Company will go to glory. Garrity has placed himself in a position to shake the old man out of that concern. If Collier loses that, he's broke—a pauper. He can't hang on, because he hasn't the ready resources. He'll have to sell his Blue Stockings stock to save Northern Can. If he had a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in ready cash he could pull through. It'll take half of that to oust Garrity from Northern Can, and the other half is needed for the team. Garrity will put it up to him to-morrow. In the meantime, can you and I raise one hundred and fifty thousand?"

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"You and I!" cried Lefty. "Not a dollar! Not a cent! How will Garrity put it up to Collier to-morrow? Collier is in—"

"Philadelphia!" cut in Weegman sharply.

The southpaw stared, thunderstruck. "Philadelphia! You mean that he's in this country?"

"He arrived to-day, and took a train at once for Philadelphia. I cabled him to come, and to keep his coming secret. Those were Garrity's orders."

Locke sat down heavily, still staring at Weegman.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SHATTERING STROKE

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That explained it. Now Lefty knew why he had received no answer to his cablegrams. Before the first was sent, Charles Collier was on the high seas, bound for America. He was home, and Garrity held him in the hollow of his hand. On the morrow the owner of the Blue Stockings was to feel the crushing grip of the triumphant schemer.

Weegman watched the southpaw's face, noting the look of consternation upon it. Suddenly snapping his fingers, he began speaking again: "That's why I came to you, Locke. What's done

must be done quickly. After eleven o'clock to-morrow it will be too late. You know what that means for you. Garrity hates you like poison, and you won't last any time after he gets control. You can raise that money."

"A hundred and fifty thousand dollars! You're crazy!"

"You can do it, and save yourself. If you'll do the right thing by me, I'll tell you how to raise the needful. Together we'll hand Garrity his bumps. What do you say? Is it a go?" He sprang up and approached, his hand extended.

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Locke rose and faced him. The scorn and contempt upon his face would have withered a man less calloused. Weegman recoiled a little, and his hand dropped to his side.

"Weegman," Lefty said, "you're the most treacherous scoundrel I ever had the bad fortune to meet. You're just about as trustworthy as a rattlesnake. Heaven knows I need money, and I certainly want to hold my job, but not even to save my own father and mother from being turned out of the home that has sheltered them so long would I enter into any sort of partnership with you."

A look of astonished wrath contorted Weegman's features, and a snarling laugh broke from his lips. "You poor fool!" he cried. "You've thrown away your last chance! I did think you would know enough to save yourself, but I see you haven't an atom of sense in your head."

There was something almost pitying in the smile Lefty gave him. Something, also, that caused the man a sudden throb of apprehension.

"You're the fool, Weegman," returned the southpaw. "You have confessed the whole rotten scheme. You have betrayed yourself and your fellow conspirator, Garrity."

"Bah!" the rascal flung back, snapping his fingers again. "What good will it do you? I'll deny everything. You can't prove a thing. I was careful that there should be no witnesses, no one to hear a word that passed between us."

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Locke grabbed him by the wrist, and snapped him round with a jerk, facing one wall of the room. "And I," he cried, "took care that every word we uttered should be heard by two reliable persons. I set the trap for Garrity, but I have been unable to decoy him into it. You walked into it unbidden. Look!"

With two strides he reached a dresser that stood against the wall. He seized it and moved it aside. With one finger he pointed to a small, square, black object that clung to the wall two feet from the floor.

"Look!" he commanded again.

Weegman stared uncomprehendingly, yet with the perspiration of dread beginning to bead his forehead.

"What is it?" he asked huskily.

"A dictograph!" answered Lefty. "I had it put in two days ago. When you met me a short time ago and asked for a private interview I started to turn you down. Then I saw old Jack Kennedy and Stillman, the reporter, in the background. They gave me a signal. Thirty seconds after we entered this room they were in the room adjoining, listening by means of that dictograph to every word that passed between us. We've got you, Weegman, and we've got Garrity, too. Criminal conspiracy is a rather serious matter."

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All the defiance had faded from Bailey Weegman's eyes. He trembled; he could not command even a ghost of a laugh. He started violently, and gasped, as there came a sharp rap on the door.

"They want to take another good look at you to clinch matters so that they can make oath to your identity," said Locke, swiftly crossing and flinging the door open. "Come in, gentlemen!"

Kennedy and Stillman entered. Weegman cowered before them. They regarded him disdainfully.

"You beaned him all right, Lefty," said the ex-manager. "He wasn't looking for the curve you put over that time."

The reporter paused to light a cigarette. "After your arrest, Weegman," he said, "I advise you to make haste to turn State's evidence. It's your only chance to escape doing a nice long bit in the stone jug." He turned, closed the door behind him, and shot the bolt again. "In the meantime," he added, "I think we can persuade you to refrain from warning Garrity regarding what is coming to him shortly after eleven o'clock to-morrow."

Looking feeble and broken, Charles Collier sat at his desk in the office of the Blue Stockings Baseball Club. On the desk before him lay the books of the club and a mass of letters and documents. At one end of the desk sat Tom Garrity, smoking a big cigar and looking like a Napoleon who dreamed of no impending Waterloo. He was speaking. His words and manner were those of a conqueror.

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"You can see how the land lies, Collier. You should have sold out your interest in the team before going abroad. Weegman made a mess of it. To-day you can't realize fifty cents on the dollar. I've offered you my Northern Can stock for your holdings. That's the best way out for you now. If you refuse you'll lose Northern Can and the team, both. Better save one by sacrificing the other."

Collier wearily lifted a protesting hand. "You don't have to repeat it, Garrity; I know you've got me cornered. I'm merely waiting for Weegman. He promised to be here at eleven. It's past that

hour.”

Without asking permission, Garrity reached for the desk phone. “I’ll call in my lawyers,” he said. “They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Before he could lift the receiver from the hook the door swung open, and Weegman came in, pale and shrinking. At his heels followed Locke, Kennedy, and Stillman. With an astonished exclamation, Garrity put the instrument down. 293

“I hope we don’t intrude,” said Lefty, smiling on the startled owner of the Rockets. “Having learned from Weegman of this little business meeting, we decided to drop in. I’m very glad to see that you have arrived home in time, Mr. Collier.”

“Too late!” sighed the hopeless man at the desk. “Too late! You’re just in time to witness the transference of the Blue Stockings to Garrity.”

“On the contrary,” returned the southpaw easily, “we have come to purchase Mr. Garrity’s Blue Stockings stock at the prevailing price. Likewise his interest in Northern Can.”

Garrity rose, his face purple with wrath. A tremendously explosive ejaculation burst from his lips. “What in blazes do you mean?” he roared.

“Just what I have said,” Locke answered calmly. “Since arriving in town I have made arrangements for this little business matter. I have opened an account with the New Market National by depositing a certified check for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, which is more than enough to make the purchases mentioned. Mr. Collier’s attorney will arrive in ten minutes or so to see that everything is done in a legal manner.” 294

“But you can’t buy a dollar’s worth of my holdings in either concern.”

“You may think so now. I’m sure you’ll change your mind in a few moments. It is also reported that, for the good of the game, you’ll get out of organized baseball. Have you brought a copy of the second edition of the *Morning Blade* with you, Stillman? Show it to Mr. Garrity, please.”

The reporter drew a newspaper from his pocket, opened it, passed it to Garrity. One finger indicated a half-column article, with headlines.

GARRITY TO GET OUT.

WILL DISPOSE OF HIS INTERESTS IN THE ROCKETS AND ABANDON BASEBALL.
HINTS OF A CONSPIRACY TO WRECK THE BLUE STOCKINGS.

Garrity’s eyes glared. His breath whistled through his nostrils. His wrath was volcanic. “Somebody’ll pay for that!” he shouted, swinging his ponderous fist above his head like a sledge hammer. “What’s it mean?”

“It means,” answered Stillman, “that more will follow, giving complete details of the conspiracy—unless you decide to quit baseball for the good of the game.”

“I’ll institute a suit for libel!”

“No, you won’t. You won’t dare. We’ve got the goods on you. Let me tell you how it happened.” He did so with unrepressed satisfaction, and the man’s air of bluster gradually evaporated as he listened. But he gave Weegman a murderous look. 295

The door swung open again, and a sharp-faced little man entered briskly.

“Here’s Mr. Collier’s attorney,” said Lefty. “Now we can get down to real business.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE TEST OF MYSTERIOUS JONES

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The unscrupulous Garrity had long been a menace to organized baseball, but such efforts as had been made to jar him loose from it had failed. At last, however, like a remorseless hunter, he was caught in a trap of his own setting. Twist and squirm as he might, the jaws of that trap held him fast. Even when the representatives of a syndicate met him by agreement to take the team over at a liberal price, he showed a disposition to balk. Stillman was there. He handed Garrity a carbon copy of a special article giving a complete and accurate statement of the conspiracy.

“If you own the Rockets to-morrow morning,” said the reporter, “that will appear, word for word, in the *Blade*. Criminal action against you will be begun at the same time.”

Upon the following day Garrity was no longer interested in the Rockets.

The *Blade* had put over a scoop by being the first paper to announce that Garrity would retire. It could have created a tremendous sensation by publishing the inside facts relative to the method by which he had been forced out. But organized baseball was under fire, and already the suspicious public was beginning to regard it askance. The menacing Federals were making no end of trouble. The cry of “rotteness” was in the air. Through the publication of the story thousands of hasty, unthinking patrons could be led to believe that, square and honest though it seemed to be on the field, the game was really rotten at the core. Stillman knew how that would hurt, and he loved the game. He was tempted to the limit, but he resisted. Not even his editor 297

ever found out just how much he knew and suppressed.

On the usual date the Blue Stockings went South for spring training. Old Jack Kennedy was among the very first to arrive at the camp. He had been engaged as coach and trainer.

The newspapers had a great deal to say about how the Federals had taken the heart out of the once great machine Collier controlled. Few of them seemed to think that Locke, the new manager, could repair the damages in less than a year or two. He would do well, they declared, if he could keep the club well up in the second division. For it was said that Lefty himself would pitch no more, and the rest of his staff, filled out with new men and youngsters, must necessarily be weak and wobbly. Occasionally a new deaf-mute pitcher, Jones, was mentioned as showing great speed, but who had ever heard of Jones? Of course he would lack the experience and steadiness a pitcher must possess to make good in fast company. 298

Behind the bat the Stockings seemed all right, for Brick King would be there. Still, it was strange that Frazer had let King go. Old Ben was wise as the serpent, and he certainly had his reasons. The Stockings were trying out a young fellow named Sheridan in center field, but surely Herman Brock was worth a dozen ordinary youngsters. Some of the papers had a habit of speaking of all youngsters as "ordinary."

Jack Keeper, who seemed slated to hold down the far cushion for the Stockings, was also a youngster Frazer had not seen fit to retain. In the few games he had played with the Wolves Keeper had made a good showing, but the general impression was that the manager had not considered him quite up to Big League caliber. Various other youngsters who had been farmed out to the minors were being used at second and short, and two of them, Blount and Armstrong, from the Cotton States League, seemed to be the most promising. But what an infield it would be, with three-fourths of the players "unripened"! The interest of the fans who read this sort of "dope" turned to the Wolves, who were almost universally picked as probable pennant winners. 299

All this was natural enough. The Wolves had held together before the Federal raids better than any team in the league. Certainly no one who knew much about baseball would have chosen the Blue Stockings in advance for a come-back. But in baseball, and nearly everything else, there is no fixed rule of reckoning that can't be smashed. Plenty of old-timers will say this is not so, just as men assert that there is nothing like luck in the game. The Stockings continued to attract little attention during their tour North, although they won exhibition games regularly and with ease. Jones pitched in some of these games. Locke did not.

All the same, no day passed that Lefty failed to get out and warm up with his pitchers. Dillon, Reilley, Lumley, and Savage were the old flingers left with the staff. The "Glass Arm Brigade," it was called. Savage was regarded as the only one of the quartet who possessed the stamina to work through nine hard innings. Counting him out, the team would have to depend on young twirlers. Of course, Locke warmed up merely from habit and as an example for the others. Otherwise he would try to pitch sometimes in a game.

The season opened with the Blue Stockings playing against the Dodgers, away from home. Mysterious Jones pitched and shut the Dodgers out, his team making five runs behind him. Even that created no more than a slight flurry, for the Dodgers were chronic subcellar champions. Jones had speed, and it had dazzled them. But wait until he went up against real batters! 300

Reilley and Lumley, taking turns on the mound, succeeded in handing the Dodgers the second game by a one-sided score. Savage went in and captured the third contest, but Pink Dillon dropped the fourth after making a fight for it up to the eighth inning. If that was the best the Blue Stockings could get, an even break, when facing the habitual tailenders, what would happen to them when they tackled the Wolves in the series to follow?

The crowd turned out loyally to witness the opening game on the home grounds, but even the most hopeful among the fans permitted their courage to be tinged with pessimism. They were in that state of mind that would lead their sympathies easily to turn to the opposition. True, they hailed Lefty cheerfully and encouragingly from the stands and bleachers, but they could not have the faith in him as a manager that they had had as a pitcher. They were stirred, however, by the sight of old Jack Kennedy, and they gave him a rousing cheer. It warmed the cockles of the veteran's heart. He doffed his cap to them. 301

Frazer came over from the visitors' bench and shook hands with Locke and Kennedy.

"I hope," said Ben, "that you're going to give us a crack at that dummy speed merchant to-day, Lefty. We want to see if he is a real pitcher."

Coming forth from the home team's dugout, a swarthy small man, who wore knickerbockers and a wrist watch, overheard these words.

"Bo-lieve me, Frazy," said Cap'n Wiley, "you'll never ask for him again with any great avidity after you face him once. I hope you'll excuse me for butting in and making that statement without the polite formality of an introduction to you, but I am so impetuous! I'm the proud party who sold Jonesy to Lefty. Shortly after that little transaction I was unnecessarily worried lest he should decide to abandon baseball, but he has just informed me that, having succeeded in giving away the last of an infinitesimal fortune of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, he is now excruciatingly happy and ready to follow pitching as a profession."

Frazer looked the odd character over tolerantly. "So you're the party who bunkoed Lefty, are you?" He laughed. "You're very much in evidence before the game begins, but I fancy it'll be difficult to find you with a microscope when it's finished-if Locke has the nerve to pitch your 302

dummy wonder.”

“I think I’ll start him on the hill, at any rate,” said the manager of the Blue Stockings.

Apparently Wiley started to cheer, but checked himself abruptly. “I’ll conserve my vocal cords,” he tittered. “I doubt not that my voice will be frazzled to a husky whisper before the contest terminates. Take a tip from me, Mr. Frazer, and send your premier twirler on to the firing line. Smoke Jordan’s the only pitcher you have who can make the game interesting with Jones pastiming for the Stockings.”

“Jordan has asked to pitch,” returned Ben, “but I have half a dozen others who would do just as well.”

Locke was passing in front of the section occupied by the newspaper men when Stillman called to him. “I don’t see your wife here, nor Miss Collier,” said the reporter. “I looked for both to be on hand for the opening game on the home grounds.”

“Unfortunately neither was able to get here, although they planned to do so,” explained Lefty. “You know they have been spending the past eight weeks in Southern California with Virginia’s aunt, who invited them to accompany her and would not take no for an answer. They’ll be on hand to-morrow, however.”

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Stillman leaned toward the wire netting and lowered his voice. “Has Collier ever caught on to the fact that the sister with whom he had quarreled furnished the capital to save him from going to smash?” he questioned.

“Not yet. It’s still a mystery to him how I was able to come forward at the psychological moment with that loan.”

The newspaper man laughed softly. “He came near passing away from heart failure that day. He was shocked almost as much as Garrity, but in a different way.” His manner changed to one of concern. “You’re going to use Jones to-day, aren’t you? Think you have any chance to win?”

“Unless I’ve made a mistake in estimating that man,” replied Locke, “it won’t be his fault if we lose. But it’ll be a test for the whole team as well as Jones.”

It was truly a test. A pitcher who was merely a “speed merchant” could not have lasted three innings against the Wolves, who “ate speed.” It was not long, however, before the anxious crowd, and the visiting team as well, began to realize that the mute twirler had something more than speed. Now and then he mixed in a sharp-breaking curve, and his hopper was something to wonder at, something that made the batters mutter and growl as they slashed at it fruitlessly. But, best of all, besides coolness and judgment, he had that prime essential of all pitchers, control. With never-failing and almost monotonous regularity, he seemed to put the sphere precisely where he tried to put it.

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In Brick King, Jones had a valuable aid. King knew his old associates; if any one of them had a batting weakness, he was aware of it. And not once during the game did Jones question a signal given him by King. What Brick called for he pitched, and put it just where it should be put. With such rifle accuracy, the work of the man behind the bat seemed easy, save for the fact that occasionally Jones’ smokers appeared almost to lift the backstop off his feet. But King held them as if his big mitt had been smeared with paste.

Smoke Jordan was also in fine fettle. It was a pitcher’s battle, with the crowd watching and gasping and waiting for “the break.” It must not be imagined that the Wolves did not hit the ball at all, but for a long time they could not seem to hit it safely, and for four innings they could not get a runner on. In the first of the fifth, however, a cracking single and two errors permitted them to score an unearned run.

“If I know what I’m talking about,” said Ben Frazer, “we had no license to get that tally. Now, Smoke, you’ve got to hold ’em. If that dummy don’t crack, I’ll acknowledge that he’s a real pitcher.”

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“I’ll hold ’em,” promised Jordan.

But he couldn’t keep his promise. In the sixth, with one down, King beat out an infield hit, reaching the initial sack safely by an eyelash. He stole second on the catcher for whom he had been discarded, to the disgust of Frazer. The crowd seemed to forget that Jones was deaf and dumb, for it entreated him to smash one out, and Cap’n Wiley, from his place in a box, howled louder than any ten others combined. Jones drove a long fly into left, but the fielder was there, and King was held at second.

Hyland followed. Jordan, a bit unsteady, bored him in the ribs.

Then Keeper, another Wolf discard, came up and singled to right field. Covering ground like a hundred yards’ sprinter, King registered from second on that hit, tying the score up.

The crowd went wild. The Blue Stockings and Mysterious Jones had the fans with them after that. Constantly that great gathering rooted for another run—just one more. Hyland perished on third when Spider Grant popped weakly.

If possible, the Wolves were fiercer than ever. In the first of the eighth they got Jones into a hole again through another hit and errors which peopled the corners, with not a man down. Then Jones won a roaring ovation from the standing multitude by striking out three men in succession.

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The game was settled in the last of the ninth, and again Jack Keeper figured in the play. He had

reached second, with one out, when Grant hit into the diamond. The ball took an amazingly high bound. The shortstop went for it, at the same time seeing Keeper scudding for third, and realizing that it would be impossible to get him at that sack. The moment he got the ball, the shortstop whipped it to first, catching Grant by a foot.

There was a shout of warning. Keeper had not stopped at third. Over the sack at full speed he had flashed, and on toward home. The first baseman lined the sphere to the catcher, who had leaped into position. Keeper hit the dirt, twisting his body away from the catcher, who got the ball and jabbed at him—a fraction of a second too late.

Keeper had accomplished a feat that is the desire of every base runner's heart. He had scored from second on an infield out. And that performance gave the Blue Stockings the game.

While the crowd was still shouting its rejoicing, Cap'n Wiley found Frazer shaking hands with Lefty.

"I demand an apology!" croaked Wiley, barely able to speak.

"I apologize," said Frazer. "Your dummy *can* pitch! But a team with one real pitcher is scarcely equipped to cut much figure in the race. Who'll you use to-morrow, Locke?"

"I am thinking of trying out another one of our uncertainties," answered the southpaw, with an enigmatical smile.

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CHAPTER XXXVII

THE RETURN OF LEFTY

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The work of patching up his team and whipping it into shape had kept Lefty Locke busy pretty nearly every minute of his time while awake, since the beginning of the training season. With that task before him, and knowing how little attention he could spare for Janet, he had raised no objections when she had asked to accompany Mrs. Vanderpool and Virginia on the California trip. While he was not foolish enough to believe that the reconstructed team could become a pennant contender that season, he did have hopes of finishing in the first division, which, under the circumstances, would be a triumph indeed.

He had found Janet's letters interesting enough, but his concentration on other matters had prevented him from giving them much thought once they were read through. She had told him of the rumor that Bailey Weegman, having been lucky in escaping prosecution for his part in the conspiracy, had started some sort of mail-order business and was said to be taking in money "hand over fist."

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Far more interesting, however, although almost as quickly forgotten, was the gossip about Virginia and Franklin Parlme. Having returned from his hasty and fruitless voyage across the pond, Parlme had felt not only injured but outraged by the treatment he had received. It was impossible for Virginia honestly to deny that she had been led to distrust him—and by Weegman! That cut the deepest. She had kept him ignorant of the fact that she had returned home, thus allowing him to go rushing off to Europe in an attempt to find her. That had been his sole purpose; he had been in no way concerned with Garrity in a scheme to wrest the control of the Blue Stockings from Collier. It was true that, having come into a limited inheritance, he had purchased two or three small lots of the club's stock. His judgment had told him that the price to which it had dropped made it a good investment. Garrity had been anxious to get hold of that stock. He had pursued Parlme and endeavored to buy the certificates at a price that would have permitted the holder of them to realize a good profit. But what Garrity had wanted so badly Parlme had considered still more valuable, and he had refused to part with a single share.

A sense of injury on one side and shame and false pride on the other had prevented complete reconciliation between Parlme and Virginia. But Janet wrote that Miss Collier was not happy, although she made a brave pretense of being so. Once or twice Janet had detected her alone, crying.

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Lefty had practically forgotten about these things until, on that second day of battle with the Wolves, only a few minutes before the game was to begin, he looked toward the club owner's box, occupied as he knew by Virginia and Janet, and made the discovery that Franklin Parlme was likewise there. The southpaw stood still in his tracks, and stared, smiling; for he saw that Parlme and Virginia were chatting and laughing, while Janet watched them with an expression of complete satisfaction and pleasure.

"Patched it up at last, thank goodness!" muttered Locke. "I think I'll keep away until after this game is over. Plenty of time to congratulate them then."

He had been warming up, as usual, but to-day it was observed that he did so alone with Brick King. Many of those who took note of this were led to speculate. Jack Stillman saw it, and smiled wisely to himself.

A crowd, bigger than that of the previous day, had turned out. The Blue Stockings' unexpected opening victory over the Wolves was the cause. Perhaps that had been no more than a flash in the pan, but the fans wanted to see for themselves. Deep down in the hearts of most of them was

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a sprouting hope that it presaged something more.

Practice was over. The home team was spreading out on the field and making ready. Scrappy Betts, first man up for the visitors, was swinging two bats, prepared to drop one of them and advance to the plate. The announcer lifted his megaphone, and, sitting forward on the edges of their seats, the crowd strained their ears to catch the names of the battery men. "Who's going to pitch for us?" was the question they had been asking.

Through the megaphone came the usual hoarse bellow. For an instant it seemed to strike the great gathering dumb. Then a wild yell of astonishment and delight went up. Everywhere in the stands and on the bleachers fans turned to their neighbors and shouted:

"Locke! It's Lefty! Good old Lefty! Yow! Ye-ee!"

They rose as one person and roared at him in a mighty chorus when he walked out to the mound. If he believed in himself, if he had the courage to go in there against Frazer's hungry Wolves, they believed in him.

The umpire adjusted his wind pad. Betts dropped one bat and came forward, pausing a moment a few feet from the plate while Locke sent two or three across to get the range. That good left arm swung free and unrestrained, without a single sign to indicate that there had ever been anything the matter with it. Smiling, the southpaw nodded to Betts as King pulled on the wire cage.

"You can patch up crockery, Lefty, old man," said Scrappy as he stepped into the box, "but you never can make it as good as new." Then, having tried to work the portsider to the limit, he finally whaled out a safety. "I knew it!" he cried from first. "Bluff won't mend a busted wing, old boy!"

Whether or not Locke was nervous, he passed the next man.

The cheering of the crowd died away. Disappointment and apprehension brought silence, save for the confident chattering of the Wolf coaches and the attempted encouragement of the players behind the southpaw. Hope began to sicken and wilt.

Cool and unruffled, Brick King smiled. "An accidental hit and a pass won't count in the result today," he said. "Show Kipper the ball in your hand. He won't see it again."

Kipper whiffed three times without making as much as a foul tip. The crowd began to wake up again.

Herman Brock sauntered out. Frazer had given him Bob Courtney's position in the batting order, the "clean-up" place. No man knew Herman better than Lefty, and the efforts of the German were quite as futile as those of Kipper.

The crowd was cheering again as Brock retired disgustedly. Confidence had been restored suddenly.

"Oh, you Lefty!" was the cry. "You're there!"

Locke easily forced the following batter to pop to the infield. He had settled into his stride. If he could keep it up, the shouting throng knew he had indeed "come back" as strong as ever. Already they were telling one another what that meant. With three first-string pitchers like Lefty and Jones and Savage, the team would have a fighting chance. The principal question was whether the southpaw could "go the distance."

Not only did Lefty make it, but as the game progressed he seemed to take it more and more easily. The desperate Wolves could not get at him effectively. He certainly had everything he had ever possessed; some claimed that he had more. His arm showed no sign of weakening. But he used his head quite as much as his arm. With the support of a catcher who also had brains, and who worked with him perfectly, he made the snarling, snapping Wolves appear about as dangerous as tame rabbits. Before the ninth inning was reached he knew that in Brick King he had found the one catcher with whom he could do the best work of his career.

The Blue Stockings won by a score of two to nothing. What fortune the season brought them in their fight for the pennant is told in the following volume of the Big League Series, which is entitled, "Guarding the Keystone Sack."

The moment it was over Locke made a dash for the clubhouse, getting away from the furiously rejoicing fans who came pouring down upon the field. Jones was there ahead of him. As he panted in, Lefty saw the man of mystery standing in a peculiar attitude not far from the closed door of Charles Collier's office. He seemed to be *listening*. Involuntarily the southpaw paused and listened himself.

From beyond the door came the sound of voices. He heard a man speaking, and then, suddenly, another man who appeared to be both excited and distressed. Then he saw Jones spring like a panther toward that door and hurl it open. Astonished, Lefty quickly followed Jones into the office.

They burst in upon four persons. Two of them, who looked like plain-clothes officers, seemed to have a third in charge. This man was desperately and wildly appealing to Charles Collier. It was Bailey Weegman.

"It's an outrage, I tell you!" Weegman was crying. "It's a lie! I haven't used the mails to defraud. I learned an hour ago that officers were after me on that charge, and I hurried to you, Mr. Collier. They followed me here. You must help me! I served you—"

"You served me a crooked turn," interrupted Collier coldly. "You have your nerve to come to me!"

Locke's eyes were on Jones. The man's face was aflame with triumph and joy and fathomless satisfaction. He flung out his hand, his finger pointing like a pistol at Weegman.

"Hanson Gilmore!" he cried in a terrible voice.

The mute had spoken! Frozen with amazement, Lefty saw Weegman twist round, saw a light of terror come into his eyes, saw him cower and cringe, pale as death and shaking like an aspen.

"You swore away my liberty, you dog!" the voice of Jones rang through the room. "You were the scoundrel who conceived the Central Yucatan Rubber Company, and profited by it! When the prison doors closed upon me I swore I'd never speak again until every dollar you had taken from the victims of that concern was paid back-until you were brought to book for your crime. I've kept that vow. I've searched for you, determined to bring you to justice somehow. Now you have brought justice upon yourself."

Crouching like a creature stung by the pitiless lashing of a whip, the accused wretch appealed chokingly to the officers who had arrested him: "Don't let him touch me! Look at his eyes! He's mad! Keep him off! Take me away!"

"Yes, take him away," said Jones. "And if he doesn't get a prison sentence for this last piece of work, I'll keep after him until he's punished for his other crimes."

"Take him away!" said Charles Collier, with a wave of his hand.

Tottering weakly, the rascal who had met retribution at last was led out.

The rejoicing players were stripping for their showers. Locke and Jones appeared among them.

"Boys," said Lefty, "let me introduce Martin Bowman, whom you have hitherto known as Jones. For reasons of his own, he made a vow never to speak until a certain thing should happen. Happily, events now make it possible for him to talk."

"For which I am very thankful," said Martin Bowman quietly.

They stared at him in limitless astonishment. At last Spider Grant said:

"Well, this game to-day was enough to make a deaf-and-dumb man talk!"

Eph, the colored rubber, touched Locke on the arm.

"Yo' wife and a pahty o' frien's am outside, sah," he said. "Dey said as how dey'd wait fo' you."

"Tell them I'll join them as soon as possible," directed Lefty.

THE END

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