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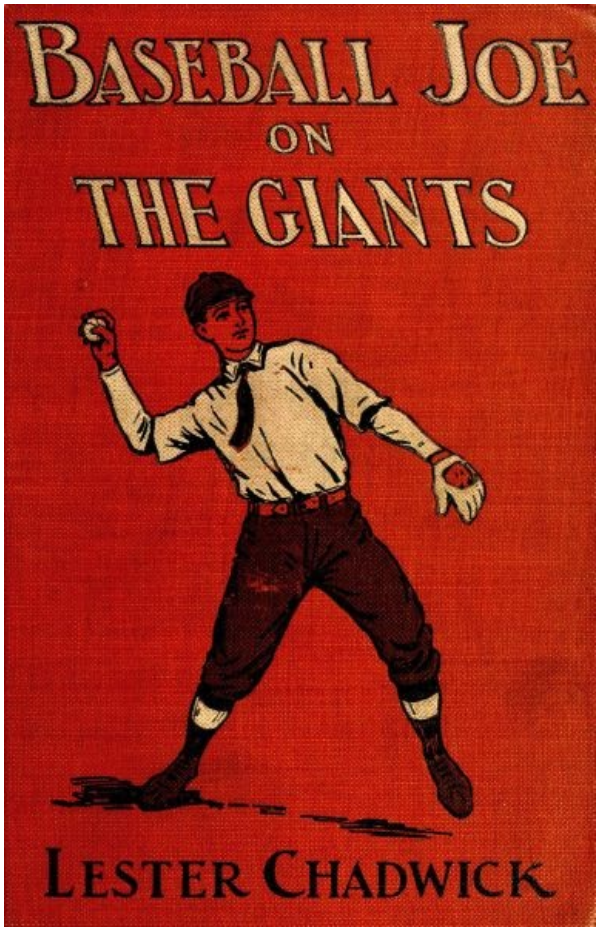

JOE CAUGHT IT SQUARE ON THE END OF THE BAT.

Baseball Joe on the Giants

OR

Making Good as a Ball Twirler in the Metropolis

By LESTER CHADWICK

AUTHOR OF
"BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS," "BASEBALL JOE IN THE BIG LEAGUE," "THE RIVAL PITCHERS," "THE EIGHT-OARED VICTORS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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Baseball Joe on the Giants

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BASEBALL JOE ON THE GIANTS

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CHAPTER I

PUTTING THEM OVER

“Now then, Joe, send it over!”

“Show us what you can do!”

“Make the ball hum!”

“Split the ozone!”

These and a host of similar cries greeted Joe Matson as he carelessly caught the ball tossed to him by one of his friends and walked over to a corner of the gymnasium that was marked off as a pitcher’s box.

“All right, fellows,” he answered, laughingly. “Anything to oblige my friends.”

“And that means all of us, Joe,” cried one of the boys heartily.

“You bet it does!” chorused the others, with a fervor that spoke volumes for the popularity of the young pitcher.

[2] It was a cold day in late winter and a large number of the village youth had gathered at the Riverside gymnasium. Riverside was Joe’s home town where his people had lived for years, and where he always spent the months between the ending of one baseball season and the beginning of the next.

Joe wound up, while the spectators stretched out in a long line and waited with interest for the first ball.

“Not too hot at the start, Joe,” cautioned Tom Davis, his old-time chum, who stood ready at the receiving end. “Remember I’m out of practice just now and I don’t want you to lift me off my feet.”

“All right, old scout,” returned Joe. “I’m not any too anxious myself to pitch my arm out at the start. I’ll just float up a few teasers to begin with.”

He let the ball go without any conscious effort, and it sailed lazily across the sixty feet that represented the distance between himself and Tom, who stood directly behind the plate that had been improvised for the occasion. It was a drop that broke just before it reached the plate and shot downward into Tom’s extended glove.

“That was a pretty one,” said Tom. “Now give us an upshoot.”

[3] Joe complied, and then in response to requests from the crowd gave them specimens of his “knuckle” ball, his in-and-out curves, his “fadeaway,” and in fact everything he had in stock.

Then with a twinkle in his eyes, seeing that Tom by this time was pretty well warmed up, he cut loose a fast one that traveled so swiftly that the eye could scarcely follow it. It landed in Tom’s glove with a report like the crack of a whip, and a roar of laughter went up from the crowd as Tom danced around rubbing his hands.

“Wow!” he yelled. “That one had whiskers on it for fair. Have a heart, Joe. I’m too young to die.”

“Don’t worry about dying, Tom,” piped up Dick Little. “Only the good die young, and that makes you safe for a while.”

“Is that the kind you feed to old Wagner when he comes up to the plate and shakes his hat at you?” asked Ben Atkins.

“It doesn’t matter much what you serve to that tough old bird,” answered Joe grimly. “He lams them all if they come within reach.”

“How fast do you suppose that last ball of yours was traveling anyway, Joe?” asked Ed Wilson.

“Oh, I don’t know exactly,” answered Joe carelessly. “Something over a hundred feet a second.”

A buzz of astonishment went up from the throng and they crowded closer around Joe.

[4]

“A hundred feet a second!” ejaculated Sam Berry, who was connected with the railroad. “Why a railroad train traveling at the rate of a mile a minute only covers eighty-eight feet a second. Do you mean to say that that ball was traveling faster than a mile a minute train?”

“According to that, Joe could throw a ball after the Empire State Express when it was running at that speed and hit the rear platform,” was the incredulous comment of Ben Atkins. “I knew that ball was going mighty fast but I didn’t think it was as swift as that.”

“It’s a pity that there isn’t some certain way of finding out,” commented Tom.

“It has been found out,” said Joe calmly.

“Is that so?”

“How was it done?”

“Why,” replied Joe, in answer to the volley of questions fired at him, “it wasn’t a hard thing at all. You know the big arms factories have a contrivance that tells them just how fast a bullet goes after it leaves the gun. They have two hoops set in a line say two hundred feet apart. These hoops are covered with a mesh of fine wires that are connected by electricity with a signal room. The bullet as it goes through the first hoop cuts a wire which registers the exact fraction of a second at which it is hit. The bullet strikes another wire as it goes through the second hoop and this also registers. Then all they have to do is to subtract the first time from the second and they have the exact time it has taken for the bullet to go that two hundred feet.” [5]

“Seems simple enough when you come to think of it,” remarked Tom.

“Then,” went on Joe, “it struck somebody that it would be perfectly easy to rig up a couple of hoops sixty feet apart and let a pitcher hurl a straight ball through both and then measure the different times at which it struck the two hoops. They did it down at some Connecticut plant and got two of the swiftest pitchers in the big leagues to try out their speed. One of them put it through at the rate of one hundred and twelve feet a second and the other at the rate of one hundred and twenty-two feet a second. That’s why I said that that last ball of mine was going at over a hundred feet a second.”

“Guess you knew what you were talking about, old boy,” said Tom, as he walked back to take his place again at the receiving end. “But after this, cut down the speed to eighty or thereabouts. That’ll be rich enough for my blood at present.”

“All right,” grinned Joe. “We’ll cut out the fast straight ones and work out a few of the curves.”

“Just what do you mean by curves?” asked a rather gruff voice.

Joe turned and recognized Professor Enoch Crabbe of the Riverside Academy, who had been strolling by, and having caught a glimpse of the unusual number present through the open door, had concluded to add himself to the spectators. He was a man generally respected in the town, but very positive and set in his views and not at all diffident about expressing them. [6]

“Good afternoon, Professor,” said Joe. “I didn’t quite understand what you meant by your question. I was just going to curve the ball——”

“That’s just it,” interrupted the professor with a superior smile. “You thought you were going to curve the direction of the ball, but you were going to do nothing of the kind. It can’t be done.”

“But Professor,” expostulated Joe, a little bewildered, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I’ve done it a thousand times.”

“I don’t question your good faith at all, Mr. Matson,” said the professor, still with that smug air of certainty. “You undoubtedly *think* you curved the ball. I positively *know* that you didn’t.”

“Well,” retorted Joe, who was getting a little nettled, “they say that seeing is believing. Just watch this ball.”

He gripped it firmly and sent in a wide outcurve. The ball went straight as a die for perhaps forty feet and then turned swiftly outward so that Tom had to jump to get his hands on it. [7]

“Now,” said Joe triumphantly, “if that wasn’t a curve, what was it?”

“An optical delusion,” replied the professor blandly.

“If a batter had been at the plate, he’d have broken his back reaching out after it,” Joe came back at him. “He wouldn’t have thought it was an optical delusion.”

“My dear sir,” said the professor smoothly, “the first law of motion is that a body set in motion tends to move in a straight line. Neither you nor anybody else can change that law. You might as well tell me that you can shoot a gun around a corner as that you can throw a ball around a corner.”

“I *can* throw it around the corner,” maintained Joe stoutly. “Not at right angles, of course, but I can make the ball go into the side street.”

The theorist smiled in a way that was exceedingly irritating. But Joe, by a great effort, mastered his annoyance.

“We won’t quarrel over it, Professor,” he remarked good-naturedly. “All I can say is that I must be getting my salary under false pretences, because the men who pay it to me do so under the impression that I can curve the ball. I’ve always had that impression myself, and so have the batters who have faced me. Rather odd, don’t you think, that so many people should be so misled?” [8]

“Not at all,” replied the professor pompously. “Truth is usually on the side of the minority.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Joe thoughtfully. “I know a moving picture operator, who’s an old friend of mine and who’d be glad, if I asked him, to do me a favor. I’ll get him to come down some day and take a picture of the ball in motion. Then we’ll study out the film and I think I can prove to you that the ball *does* curve on its way from the pitcher to the catcher.”

“How do you think you could prove anything from that?” asked Professor Crabbe cautiously, as though he were looking for a trap. “They can work all sorts of tricks with moving pictures, you know.”

“I know they can,” admitted Joe. “But this would be ‘honest Injun.’ You’d have my word of honor and the operator’s, too, that there’d be no monkeying with the pictures.”

“Well,” said Crabbe, “admitting that the pictures were honestly taken, how could they show whether the ball curved or not?”

“I’m not sure myself exactly,” answered Joe, “but it seems to me that if the ball moved in a straight line all the way, it would look the same at any point. But if it curved, it would be farther away from the camera than when it was going straight and there’d be a different focus. The ball would look flatter, more oval shaped——” [9]

Just then came a wild diversion.

Into the gymnasium crowd burst a shock-headed boy, his eyes blazing with excitement, his breath coming in gasps. All looked at him in astonishment and alarm.

“A crazy man,” stammered the boy. “He’s stolen the Bilkins baby and run off with it!”

CHAPTER II [10]

A FEARFUL SITUATION

There was a general gasp of horror mixed with unbelief.

“What do you mean?” demanded Sam Berry.

“Where did you get that yarn?” asked Ed Wilson.

“It’s true,” declared the boy. “The whole town’s hunting for him. He ran into Mrs. Bilkins’ house and snatched the baby from the cradle. The man was bareheaded and didn’t have any coat. Mrs. Bilkins ran after him, screaming, but she couldn’t catch him and——”

But the rest of the lad’s story fell on deaf ears. Joe and Tom and the others had already slipped into their coats, and now they poured pell-mell out of the door, each of them eager to be first on the scene and rescue the kidnapped baby before the madman could do it harm.

They all knew and liked Bilkins, who was a bright young fellow employed in the Harvester works. Three years before he had married and brought his bride to a pretty little cottage at the southern edge of the town. Their one baby was now nearly a year old and of course the young parents were wrapt up in him. [11]

Joe and his sister Clara had often spent a pleasant evening at the Bilkins home, and the heart of the young pitcher was hot within him as he raced in that direction, while his sympathy gave wings to his feet.

A light snow had fallen and this would have been of some assistance in tracing the marauder, but so many people had by this time joined in the hunt that many trails led in as many different directions.

Joe and Tom were circling wildly around, like hounds trying to pick up a lost scent, when a little fellow ran up to them.

“I saw him!” he cried, “a big, tall man carrying a baby! He was going down to the lumber yard.”

Like a flash Joe turned and headed the crowd that rushed in the direction pointed out.

And while he is thus racing along, it may be well, for the benefit of those who are not yet acquainted with this clever young pitcher, to mention the previous books of this series in which “Baseball Joe,” as he was affectionately known, has taken a leading part.

The beginning of his career on the diamond is told in the first volume of the series, entitled: “Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars; Or, The Rivals of Riverside.” Here Joe had his first real experience in the box. He had to fight hard to make good, but he did it, and soon became widely known in that section as one of the best of the amateur pitchers. There were many things that sought to hinder him, but he worked like a Trojan and brought his team to the front. [12]

In “Baseball Joe on the School Nine,” we find Joe in that same gritty way of his “making” the school team. There were rivalries here of a different kind than he had met before, and the bully of the school succeeded for a time in making things very unpleasant. But Joe had the “class” as a ball player that was bound to make itself felt, and in a great crisis he rose to the emergency and at the last moment brought victory from defeat.

From Excelsior Hall, Joe went to Yale, and his career in the great university is told in the third

volume of the series called “Baseball Joe at Yale; Or, Pitching for the College Championship.”

Traditions are very strong at Yale and one of them that is seldom broken is that no Freshman shall play on a ’Varsity Team. No matter how good he is, he has to win his spurs first on his class team before he can aspire to the ranks of the ’Varsity. Joe had to undergo his apprenticeship, and a hard one it was. But his light could not be kept under a bushel, and by sheer force of merit he [13] finally captured the attention of the leaders in athletics. A combination of circumstances put it up to him to pitch for Yale against Princeton in the deciding game of the season at the Polo Grounds, and although the test was a severe one the “Yale bulldog” scored a glorious victory over the “Princeton tiger.”

But, despite the successes he had won, Joe was not altogether happy at Yale. His good mother wanted him to study to be a minister, but, while Joe appreciated what a noble calling it was, he did not feel himself cut out for a preacher. Though bright enough in his studies, he was not a natural scholar. Outdoor life had strong attractions for him, and his love for baseball combined with his natural abilities in that direction made him feel strongly inclined to take up professional baseball as his regular vocation.

His mother was grieved and almost shocked by this decision of his. She had longed to see her boy in the pulpit, and she had the mistaken feeling, shared by many good women, that there was something that was almost disreputable in being a professional ball player. But Joe was so earnest in his conviction that it was better to be a good ball player than a poor professional man, whether doctor, lawyer or minister, that his mother was reluctantly won over to his view.

Joe’s chance was not long in coming. That last great game he pitched for Yale had been seen by [14] Jimmie Mack, manager of the Pittston team of the Central League. He scented an acquisition for his nine and made Joe an offer that was too good to reject. His struggles and triumphs in that league are told in the fourth volume of the series called “Baseball Joe in the Central League; Or, Making Good as a Professional Pitcher.”

But Joe’s ambition kept pace with his progress. He was not satisfied to be merely a “minor leaguer.” He dreamed of “making” one of the “Big Leagues”—National or American, it did not matter which—but he knew how hard it was for a minor to break in. His delight can be imagined then when he learned that he had been drafted into the St. Louis club of the National League. His stirring adventures in this new field are narrated in the fifth volume of the series entitled: “Baseball Joe in the Big League; Or, A Young Pitcher’s Hardest Struggles.” Hard struggles indeed they had proved to be, but the same determination that had won for him so far carried him triumphantly through these also, and he had had the satisfaction of helping his team finish in the first division. From a “second string” pitcher he now stood among the first, and his name had become well known all over the country.

He had been very tired when he came back to the old home town to spend the winter, and the [15] rest had never seemed more grateful to him. But now he was expecting very soon the call of his team to go with them to a southern training camp, to prepare for the coming season, and for some time past he had been faithfully training in the Riverside gymnasium, where we found him when this story opened.

He was a fast and seasoned runner—any one in a big league has to be, or he would not last long—but it seemed to him he had never run as fast and hard as now when he was rushing toward the lumber yard. He knew that what was to be done had to be done quickly. And he shuddered, as he thought of the helpless baby in the grasp of a lunatic.

He had soon outdistanced his companions. Now he was getting close to the lumber yard. It was in an isolated section of the town, down near the railroad tracks which ran alongside of it. Here there were but few footmarks, and Joe could easily make out the long prints of a man’s feet pointing straight for the yard.

Another minute and Joe had entered the yard. He wound his way in and out among the piles of lumber, hoping at every turn to catch sight of the madman.

Suddenly he heard a shout that came from somewhere above him. He looked up and saw a sight that seemed to turn his blood cold.

There, on an enormous pile of lumber that towered thirty feet into the air, stood a man holding [16] a baby in his arms. He had caught sight of Joe and hailed him as though he wanted to have a talk with him. But just then a torrent of men, young and old, who had followed Joe, poured into the yard, and a yell went up as they saw the tall figure outlined against the sky.

In that wild yell the madman scented danger. He lifted his helpless burden high above his head.

“Keep back!” he shouted. “If you don’t I’ll throw the baby on the railroad tracks!”

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[17]

CHAPTER III

A CRACK SHOT

There was a cry of horror from the crowd. To be hurled to the tracks from that height meant instant death for the little one.

Several of the men had started to climb the lumber pile, but when they heard the madman's threat they stopped instantly. The man above saw that his words had taken effect and he laughed shrilly. But he still held the baby high in the air.

For a moment there was a hush of fear and indecision. Then Joe took command of the situation. His baseball experience had taught him to think quickly and act instantly.

"That's all right," he sang out to the crazy man. "You can keep the baby if you want to. We just want to have a quiet little talk with you."

The madman hesitated, looked about a little uncertainly, then slowly lowered the infant and held it cradled in his arms.

"That's right," approved Joe heartily. "You and I are the only sensible people here. These lunatics down here were making such a noise that I couldn't make you hear me. Now we can talk." [18]

"Ha, ha!" cried the lunatic, delighted at the compliment. "You hit it right that time. The whole world is mad except for you and me. And I'm not so sure of you, either," he modified, with a gravity that would have been comical under any other circumstances.

While he was speaking, Joe was giving quick directions in a low voice to the men nearest him.

"Get the fellows to spread out on all sides of the lumber pile," he said to Ed Wilson. "You, Tom," he went on to Tom Davis, "go quietly out on the tracks. Then if he does throw the baby down, we'll at least have a chance to catch it or break its fall."

The others slipped away like shadows and Joe once more sought to engross the madman's attention.

"Oh, but you must be sure of me," he expostulated in answer to what the lunatic had said. "Just watch the signs I give you, and if you can do the same that will prove that we both belong to the same lodge."

The disordered wits of the man above saw something interesting in this, and he nodded gravely.

Joe stretched out his left hand and made a number of mysterious passes in the air, at the same time closing and unclosing his fingers.

Then he stopped and the man extended his left arm and went through the same motions as nearly as he could. [19]

"Good!" cried Joe, and the madman capered about in childish pleasure at the commendation.

"Now, do this," commanded Joe, and he went through a similar lot of mummery with the right hand.

The crazy man imitated him, but to do it he had to change the baby from his right arm to the left, and this gave Joe an inspiration.

"Now, here's the hardest thing," said Joe, as he lifted both arms at once and made them revolve. "If you can do this, I'll know for sure that you're all right."

The stranger started to lift both arms to imitate Joe's revolutions, but found himself encumbered by the baby. He looked at Joe in a sheepish way, as though for advice.

"Of course you'll have to lay the baby down," said Joe, carelessly. "You can't make the right motions unless you do."

The lunatic looked at him with a sudden glint of suspicion in his eyes, but Joe was so apparently indifferent that he slowly laid the baby down.

Joe's heart was beating high now with excitement as the critical moment approached that would test the success of the plan that had suddenly darted into his brain.

A number of the village boys had been building a snow fort and having a mock battle in the lumber yard that afternoon. The snow was very wet and the snowballs that had been formed from it had almost the consistency of stone. A number of these "soakers" were still lying about and Joe saw his chance. [20]

"Sam," he murmured in a low voice to Sam Berry. "Make me three or four hard snowballs about as big as a baseball. Don't ask me why but make them hard and quick."

Sam asked no questions but worked frantically, and soon stood alongside Joe with his hands behind his back.

"All ready, Joe," he whispered. "Just reach out when the time comes and I'll put one in your hand."

The time had nearly come. Joe's manœuvering had brought it about that the baby was out of the madman's hands. The last step remained to be taken.

"That's fine," roared Joe, as the stranger, after making both hands revolve in the air, was about to pick up the baby. "Now, there's just this one thing more and if you can do that, it will prove that you and I are brother members of the same lodge."

Joe placed both hands on top of his head and began to revolve his body slowly so as to present his back to the man above. In this position he remained for about fifteen seconds. [21]

"Can you do that?" he asked solemnly.

“Of course I can,” responded the other eagerly. “Just watch.”

He slowly revolved until he stood with his back toward Joe.

Now was the latter’s opportunity.

“Quick!” he muttered to Sam Berry.

Sam put in his hand a ball of snow that was almost as solid as a stone. Joe’s fingers tightened about it and his muscles grew taut.

Many a time before had he felt that queer thrill go through his arm and shoulder as he stood before some batsman in a critical period of the game and tried to strike him out. But this time much more than a game was at stake. A human life depended upon the sureness of his aim.

He took careful aim at the back of the madman’s head and sent the icy snowball whizzing as though from a catapult.

HE SENT THE ICY SNOWBALL WHIZZING AS THOUGH FROM A CATAPULT.

Straight as an arrow it found its mark. It struck the stranger just at the base of the skull and he went down like a bullock smitten by an axe.

A wild cheer rose from the crowd as they saw the man fall. The next minute Joe had swarmed up the lumber pile with the agility of a monkey and clasped the baby in his arms.

He was rapidly followed by others, who secured the stranger. Ropes were called for, and he [22] was bound before he could recover consciousness. A doctor who was in the crowd examined him and found that he was suffering from shock but that his skull had not been fractured and there would be no serious results from the blow.

In the meantime, Joe was surrounded by a delirious throng that clapped him on the back, tried to grasp his hand, and in general deported itself as though it had just escaped from an asylum.

“What’s the matter with Matson?” shouted one enthusiast.

“He’s all right!” yelled the crowd.

“Who’s all right?”

“Joe Matson!” came back the shout in undiminished volume.

“Oh, cut it out, fellows,” growled Joe good-naturedly, feeling himself getting pink to the tips of his ears. “The first thing to do is to get this baby home to its mother.”

The baby seemed to think this was good sense, and urged the good work along by howling so lustily, that Joe quickened his steps in his eagerness to be rid of his burden. It was all very well to rescue babies, but he felt awkward and helpless when it came to handling them and he looked forward to the Bilkins home as a harbor of refuge.

Fortunately, in snatching the baby out of the cradle, the madman had gathered up the [23] bedclothes with it, so that the infant had not suffered from cold. Its lungs anyway were in good

condition, as Joe was willing to testify, and it did not seem to have suffered in any way from its involuntary flight through the town.

It was not long before Joe reached the panic-stricken home where neighbors were ministering to the frantic mother and assuring her with a brave show of confidence that her baby would soon be restored. She gave a scream of delight when Joe appeared with the little pink, fluffy bundle in his arms, and in a moment she had snatched it from him and was smothering it with kisses.

This was Joe's chance and he was trying to make a "quick sneak," as he phrased it in his own mind, but Bilkins himself and the crowd of neighbors would stand for nothing of the kind, and again he had to submit to being made a hero of, much against his will.

"It was nothing at all," he protested, blushing like a school girl at the praises showered upon him. "Any other fellow could have done the same."

"But you notice that none of the other fellows did do it," said Bilkins. "It was not only the sure and swift aim that did it, but the clever work before that that enabled you to get the baby out of [24] the man's arms and get the man himself with his back toward you so that he could not see the ball coming and dodge. It was splendid, brainy work, Joe, and I'll never forget it."

It was a long time before the excitement quieted down and Joe at last was at liberty to wend his way home. The dusk was falling now and the air was biting cold, but he was in such a glow of body and spirit that he took no note of outside conditions.

A great emergency had suddenly confronted him and he had played the man.

CHAPTER IV [25]

THE TELEGRAM

A flood of light and warmth assailed Joe as he hung up his hat and coat in the hall and burst into the living room.

"Hello, Momsey!" he cried buoyantly as he crossed the room and kissed his mother. "Hello, Sis!" as he turned to greet in a similar fashion his sister Clara. "How are you, Dad?" and he smiled affectionately at his father, who was sitting by the fire pretending to read his paper, but in reality swelling with pride in this stalwart son who was the apple of his eye.

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed his mother, happy tears welling up in her eyes as she looked upon him fondly. "I'm so proud of you that I don't know what to do or say."

"Why, what have I been doing now?" asked Joe in pretended ignorance of what she meant.

"Isn't the dear boy innocent?" laughed Clara, a pretty, winsome girl, as she slipped her arm about her brother. "Of course, he doesn't know what we mean. He hasn't set the whole town talking. He didn't save a baby from a madman. He never knew that there was anything unusual [26] going on in town this afternoon at all," she mocked.

"Oh," said Joe, "you mean the matter of the Bilkins baby."

"Yes," mimicked Clara, "we mean the matter of the Bilkins baby."

They all laughed and Joe confessed. They plied him with all sorts of questions and though he sought to minimize what he had done, they succeeded in getting a very fair idea of the almost tragic scene that had been enacted.

"You're awfully stingy with your information," said Clara, tossing her head. "Half a dozen of the neighbors have been in and told us all about what your high mightiness did. To hear them talk, I've got a brother with the brain of a Socrates and the arm of a Hercules. I'll almost be afraid to speak to you after this without knocking my head against the floor first."

"Oh, cut it out, Sis," laughed Joe, a little sheepishly. "You're making an awful lot out of a very little. I just had the luck to be Johnny-on-the-spot, and I knew how to throw a snowball so that it would do the most good."

"It was a splendid bit of work, Joe," said Mr. Matson quietly, and Joe felt his heart warm; for praise from this grave, thoughtful father of his was very dear to him.

"I hope the man wasn't very badly hurt," said Mrs. Matson, her feeling of pity for the "under [27] dog" asserting itself, now that her maternal pride had been satisfied.

"I don't think he is," remarked Joe. "Doctor Allison examined him and said that there were no bones broken. He'll come around all right, although his head is liable to ache for some time."

"Does anybody know who he is?" inquired Mr. Matson.

"He seems to be a stranger in town," answered Joe. "I heard some one say that he had been staying at the Park Hotel. I never saw him in my life before."

"What on earth did he want to take the Bilkins baby for?" asked Clara. "Did he have any grudge against the Bilkinses?"

"No, Bilkins told me that he was an entire stranger to him and his wife. He looked at him when they brought him back to town unconscious, and she had caught a glimpse of him when he

snatched the baby from the cradle. Neither knew him at all. It must have been just some crazy whim that came into his twisted brain."

"Poor little lamb," murmured Mrs. Matson, softly. "It must have been frightened to death."

"Not a bit of it," maintained Joe. "It didn't make a whimper all the time he was holding it. But the minute I grabbed it, it began to yell like mad. Seemed to think that I was butting in on its fun. [28] There's gratitude for you," he ended with a chuckle.

"I suppose you held the poor little thing upside down or something like that," said Clara, indignantly. "You men are so clumsy when it comes to handling a baby."

While they had been talking, Mrs. Matson had brought in the supper, and at sight of it Joe forgot the laughing retort he was about to hurl at his sister.

"Yum-yum!" he sniffed, as he seated himself at the steaming, savory repast. "I give you fair warning, Momsey, that I'm going to make a wreck of this table."

"Go as far as you like," beamed his mother. "The best in the house isn't any too good for my boy tonight."

Joe "waded in" to make good his threat, and for a time the conversation was rather fragmentary, as he devoted himself to the delights afforded by a good meal and a healthy appetite.

"Now bring on your crazy men," he laughed, as he sat back after dessert. "If I could knock out one of them before supper I'm good for half a dozen now."

Mr. Matson smiled as he lighted his pipe, and Mrs. Matson brought out her mending, while Clara busied herself in clearing the table.

"How about my being a minister now, Momsey?" asked Joe with a mischievous twinkle in his [29] eye. "Do you suppose a minister would have been as useful at the lumber yard this afternoon as a professional ball player?"

His mother bit off a thread before replying. It had always been a sore point with her that Joe had abandoned the plan of studying for the ministry. She had become somewhat reconciled to the idea by the success that Joe had won and the fact, as shown in his own life, that he could be a ball player and at the same time an upright, moral man. And she had to confess that the large salary that Joe earned by his skill had helped his father out on critical occasions and kept the little household together.

"Well," she admitted, half reluctantly, "I suppose you did do more good this afternoon because you were so good at throwing the ball. And yet you might be a minister and still be a good enough ball player to have done what you did today."

"I hardly think so," laughed Joe. "But that's right, Momsey, stick to your guns. But what's this?" he asked, as he saw a telegram on the mantel piece.

"Oh, yes, I meant to tell you," Mrs. Matson hastened to say. "That came for you this afternoon just before dark. I was so flustered by all that had happened it went clear out of my head. Open it [30] and let's see what it is. I hope there's no bad news in it."

Joe tore open the flimsy yellow envelope and his eye ran rapidly over its contents.

"Why, it's from Reggie!" he cried, "and it's dated from Goldsboro, North Carolina."

"From Reggie!" cried Clara with a glint of mischief in her eye. "Are you sure that it isn't from Mabel?"

Joe withered her with a look.

"No, it isn't from Mabel," he answered, vexed at himself because of the red flush he could feel creeping up his face. "It's from Reggie."

"All right," laughed Clara. "But what are you getting so red about, Joe? What does Reggie have to say?"

"It seems rather queer," said Joe, slowly. "This is the way it reads: '*Am coming on. See if you can find Talham Tabbs. Have him held.*' Now what do you make of that?"

"Who is Talham Tabbs?" asked Clara, coming closer and looking over his shoulder.

"That's the funny part of it," replied her brother. "Talham Tabbs is the name of the man I knocked stiff on the lumber pile this afternoon."

An exclamation of surprise came from each member of the family group. Even Mr. Matson was stirred out of his usual reserve by the singular coincidence.

"How do you know that?" asked his father. [31]

"Sam Berry said that that was the name the man registered under at the hotel," was the answer.

"But what possible connection can there be between Reggie Varley and this crazy man?" mused Clara.

"That's what I'd like to know," replied her brother. "That's the aggravating thing about a telegram. It tells just enough to get you worked up and then you stew in your own juice while you're waiting to find out the rest."

“It looks as though this Tabbs had committed some crime,” suggested Mr. Matson. “Else why should Reggie ask to have him held?”

“That doesn’t prove very much,” laughed Joe. “Reggie sometimes takes queer notions. There was a time once when he had half a mind to have *me* held.”

The family all laughed as they recalled the episode alluded to, but at the time it had proved no laughing matter.

It had occurred at the time that Joe had been on his way to the training camp at Montville in the year that our hero had joined the Central League. He had been sitting next to the valise owned by a dudish young man dressed in the height of fashion and possessed of what he fondly thought was a pronounced English accent. The young man had left the valise while he went to [32] send a telegram and when he returned he found the valise opened and some valuable jewelry missing.

In a very offensive way he had practically accused Joe of stealing the property, and it was only the self-control of the latter that prevented a serious row between the two. The matter had been patched up, and some time later the jewelry had been recovered through a little bit of smart detective work on Joe’s part.

Montville, the training grounds of the team, was located not far from where Reggie Varley, the foppish young man in question, lived. One day Joe had been fortunate enough to stop a runaway horse and save its driver, a beautiful girl, from danger and probable death. She turned out to be Mabel Varley, Reggie’s sister. Joe decided very promptly that however he felt toward the brother, he ought to feel very differently toward the sister, a resolution that was helped very much by a pair of charming brown eyes, a wonderful complexion and sundry other advantages no less pleasing. Miss Mabel, on her part, knew a handsome, athletic young man when she saw one, and the romantic circumstances of their meeting helped to increase the impression he had made on her. Since then, they had met frequently and—Oh, well, it is sufficient to say that Joe, healthy as he looked, was threatened with palpitation of the heart whenever he heard Mabel’s name, and it [33] had become one of Clara’s favorite amusements to start the color rioting over her brother’s neck and face whenever the demon of mischief gave her the opportunity.

Reggie himself had turned out to be not such a bad fellow, despite his little foolish peculiarities. He had apologized handsomely to Joe and the two were now warm friends.

“Have him held,” chuckled Joe, as he reread the telegram. “Well, that’s an easy job. The jail authorities have him now and I won’t have to hold him.”

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[34]

CHAPTER V

AT THE JAIL

The rest of the evening following such an eventful day passed pleasantly. Joe had usually been in the habit of strolling down town for a chat with his friends at the hotel. But he knew that the whole town would be buzzing with the exciting adventure of the afternoon and that, if he made his appearance, he would be dragged into the center of the limelight. He shrank from the hero worship likely to be called forth and decided to remain in the home circle.

But he could not wholly cheat the village people of a chance to show their enthusiasm, and all that evening friends came trooping in, to rehearse the story of his exploit, so that it was very late when he finally was able to get to bed.

He rose early the following morning and after a hearty breakfast took his hat and left the house. At almost every step he had to stop and talk to some one who hailed him, so that it was considerably later when he stood in the lobby of the Park Hotel.

“By jiminy! that was a crack shot you made yesterday, Joe,” said Sol Cramer, the proprietor. [35]

“It had to be,” laughed Joe. “If I hadn’t winged him that first time, I wouldn’t have had another chance. He’d have got suspicious and thrown the baby down on the tracks.”

“Was that what you call your ‘bean ball,’ Joe?” drawled Ed Wilson.

“I suppose you might call it that,” answered Joe with a grin. “It certainly ‘beaned’ him all right. I’ve had to send them in pretty close sometimes to keep some fresh batter from crowding the plate, but this is the first time I ever hit a man in the head. By the way, how is he getting on today? It isn’t the poor fellow’s fault that he’s crazy and I’m awfully sorry that I had to hit him at all. I hope he’ll soon be as well as ever.”

“Oh, I don’t think you need to worry about it,” returned Sol. “Doctor Allison has been down to the jail to see him, and though there’s a lump on the man’s head as big as an egg, the doc says it’s nothing serious.”

“How long has he been staying here?” asked Joe.

“Nearly a week,” replied Sol. “It would be a week tonight if he’d stayed.”

“And hadn’t you noticed anything that might make you think he was off his head?” queried Joe.

[36]

“Not the least thing,” was the answer. “He was as quiet and well behaved as any man could be. He kept a good deal to himself and didn’t seem to know any one in town, so that I wondered sometimes just what his idea was in coming here. But that’s none of my business as long as he pays his bills, and I didn’t have any complaint on that score. Paid me a week in advance as soon as he had planked down his grip and registered. Paid it from a big roll of bills, too, so that it probably wasn’t money worry that made him go mad. I thought he might be one of them literary fellows that come to a quiet town sometimes to write a book.”

“And you’re sure his name is Talham Tabbs?”

“That’s the name he registered by,” answered Sol, at the same time turning the hotel register around so that the group could plainly see the name written in a firm business hand. “Then too, his laundry has the initials T. T., and the same letters are on his valise. I guess that’s his handle all right.”

“You ought to know his name, Joe,” jibed Tom Davis. “You’re both members of the same secret society.”

There was a roar of laughter as they recalled the ridiculous signs that Joe had made and the gravity with which the madman had imitated them.

“I’d hate to have Joe initiate me into his lodge,” said Sam Berry. “I only have one head and I need it in my business.” [37]

“Same here,” chuckled Ed Wilson. “I believe in the strenuous life, but Joe’s methods can hardly be called ladylike. Almost rough, you might say.”

“It was too bad,” said Joe, half remorsefully. “I hated to do it, but it seemed the only way, and it was a matter of life and death.”

“You needn’t have any qualms of conscience about it,” said Sol. “It was the finest thing that has been done in this old town for many a moon, and it’ll be a long time before people get through talking about it.”

“If you hadn’t done it, there would probably be crepe on the Bilkins doorbell this morning,” added Sam. “I tell you it made my blood run cold when he swung the baby in the air. I thought it was a goner sure.”

“‘All’s well that ends well,’” quoted Joe, lightly. “I think I’ll run down to the jail and take a look at this Talham Tabbs. I may get some inkling of what he had in mind when he kidnapped the baby.”

“You have a swell chance of getting anything from that chap,” said Ed Wilson, skeptically. “But perhaps it won’t do any harm to try.”

Joe said goodby to his companions and sauntered down to the jail, which was located on the southeast edge of the town. A few minutes’ walk brought him within sight of it. [38]

It was not an impressive structure. In the little town of Riverside crimes were few and far between. The chief function of the jail was to take charge of wandering hoboes and to house some participant in a brawl such as took place from time to time between the laborers at the Harvester works. Once in a great while, something more important was charged against some reluctant dweller in the jail, and on such occasions there was more than ordinary stir within its sleepy precincts.

It was a small two-story building. The upper part was set apart as living quarters for the warden and his family. On the lower floor, there were a number of cells, and a large room in which the occupants of the jail were allowed to gather at stated periods for meals and recreation. In addition, there was a room set aside as a hospital room or infirmary for prisoners who might be ill or disabled, and it was in this that Joe expected to find the victim of his shot the day before.

He was admitted by Hank Bailey, the warden, who shook his hand warmly and repeated the congratulations that Joe was getting tired of hearing.

Hank was a stout, rubicund person and quite advanced in years. He had gained his position not because of any special fitness, but as a henchman of the political party that at that time ruled the county. He was slow and easy going and would have been utterly out of place in a larger jail, where strict supervision and discipline were demanded. But in this sleepy little jail he fitted in well enough, and, as he was good-natured and a general favorite in town, there were no special complaints against his administration. [39]

“Well, Hank,” said Joe, after greetings had been exchanged. “I suppose you know pretty well whom I’ve come to see.”

“Sure thing,” replied Hank. “You want to see the lunatic that you brought off his perch yesterday in the lumber yard. He’s in the hospital room now by the doctor’s orders. Come along and I’ll let you take a squint at him.”

“How does he seem to be today?” asked Joe, as he followed his conductor through the corridor on the lower floor of the jail.

“Oh, he’s doing well enough,” responded Hank. “Doc Allison was here this morning and said he’d be as good as ever in a day or two. Said though that if that snowball had hit him a fraction of an inch nearer the left ear his skull would have been fractured sure.”

“Does he seem to be in his right mind?” asked Joe, as the warden fitted the key into the lock.

"Sometimes he does," replied his guide, "and then again he doesn't. The doc kind o' sounded him as to his doin's yesterday, but he either didn't recollect or he was shammin', one or the other. But you can see him now and judge for yourself." [40]

The jailer passed in and Joe followed.

On a bed in the further corner of the room, Talham Tabbs was lying. It was the first time that Joe had had a chance to examine his face closely and he embraced the opportunity.

It was by no means an unpleasant face nor did it bear any marks of criminality. It was long and lean, but the features were good. If Joe had passed him on the street and noticed him at all, he would have set him down as a keen business or professional man. The only thing at all queer or abnormal were his eyes, that, as he turned them on his visitors, glowed beneath his eyebrows like twin coals.

His glance passed indifferently over the warden, but when he caught sight of Joe there was a flash of recognition. And what surprised Joe was that the recognition was a friendly one. There was no glint of malice or revenge. It was clear that he did not know that it was Joe's hand that had brought about his downfall, and again Joe had that half remorseful twinge that bothered him before, although his common sense told him he had acted rightly.

This feeling was intensified when Tabbs favored him with a solemn wink and then raised his left hand and twiddled the fingers as Joe had done yesterday. Joe was stumped for a minute, but quickly recovered himself and returned the signal. Then Tabbs went through the same flummery with his right hand, then with both hands, and would have concluded the ritual by turning his back to Joe, if the attempt to do so had not revealed that he was strapped to the bed. [41]

Hank Bailey all this time had looked on with growing bewilderment.

"What does all this monkey business mean?" he demanded, helplessly.

Joe nudged him with his foot.

"It's all right," he affirmed. "Mr. Tabbs is a member of the same lodge with me, and because we are brothers he's going to tell me all about what happened yesterday."

A doubtful look came into Tabbs' face.

"How can I with him here," he asked, pointing to the warden. "He isn't a member, and he might give away our secrets if we talked them over before him."

"That's right," agreed Joe with another nudge at Hank. "Please step outside, Mr. Warden, while Brother Tabbs and I confer."

Hank, although still bewildered, complied.

"Now," said Joe, turning to Tabbs and speaking with impressiveness, "I conjure you by the great Te-To-Tum to answer me truly."

Tabbs' face became as grave as an owl's. It was evident that he took a childish delight in this solemn nonsense. [42]

"Speak, brother," he said, "and I will answer truly."

"It is well," said Joe. "Do you know a man named Bilkins?"

Tabbs' face was blank.

"No," he answered. "Never heard the name before."

"Why did you take his baby yesterday?" continued Joe.

"Was that his baby?" the prisoner asked. "I just took it for a lark. The baby needed exercise and so did I."

Joe thought to himself that what the baby needed might well be left to the judgment of its mother, but he continued:

"Do you know a man named Varley?"

A cunning look came into the prisoner's eyes and he no longer looked straight at Joe, as he answered evasively:

"I've known several people by that name in my time."

"This man was Reginald Varley, and he lives at Goldsboro, North Carolina," Joe went on, relentlessly.

"No," snapped Tabbs. "Never met him."

Joe felt sure that the man was not telling the truth, but he was getting so restless and angry under his questioning that Joe felt it was useless just then to pursue the matter further. [43]

"All right, brother," he concluded, as he rose to go. "I'll see you later."

"Perhaps," said Tabbs, and it was not till afterwards that Joe sensed the meaning that lay behind that final word of Talham Tabbs.

He rejoined Hank Bailey, who was waiting in the corridor.

"Well," that worthy greeted him, "did you get anything out of him?"

"Not so you could notice it," replied Joe. "There isn't much nourishment in talking to a

madman.”

“By the way, Hank,” he went on, as they walked toward the street entrance, “there’s no chance of any one breaking out of here, I suppose?”

“Leave that to me,” answered Hank, swelling with a sense of his importance. “Nobody ain’t ever broke out of this jail yet, and by crikey, they won’t, as long as I’m the keeper!”

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[44]

CHAPTER VI

GLORIOUS NEWS

When Joe said goodby to Hank Bailey it was nearly noon, and as his way led past the Bilkins home he met Bilkins himself hurrying home from the Harvester Works for lunch.

The latter grasped Joe’s hand and almost wrung it from its socket.

“The more I think of what you did yesterday, the more grateful I am,” he declared. “We were all so worked up that I didn’t thank you half as much as I ought to have done. But I’ve been thinking of it every moment since, and so has my wife.”

“How is she, after the strain of yesterday?” asked Joe, hoping to change the subject from his own exploits.

“She’s all right,” replied the young husband. “Of course, she’s a little shaky and weepy yet, but that’s not to be wondered at when you think of what she went through. But here we are right at the gate. Come in for a minute.”

[45]

Joe would gladly have pleaded an excuse but hardly saw how he could, and he followed Bilkins into the neat little living room of the cottage.

Mrs. Bilkins hurried forward to meet him.

“Oh, Joe!” she exclaimed, as she clasped his hand, “I’ve been hoping to get this chance of thanking you for what you did for us yesterday. I was so excited at getting my baby back that I couldn’t think of anything else at the time. But I realize that if it hadn’t been for your quickness and presence of mind I wouldn’t have any baby now.”

She was perilously close to tears, and Joe, who had the masculine dread of a scene, sought to introduce a lighter note.

“The baby himself didn’t seem glad,” he laughed. “The little rascal thought he was out for a grand spree, and he was as good as a kitten while the lunatic had hold of him. But the minute I grabbed him he started in to howl like all possessed. He didn’t like the idea of my breaking up his fun.”

This broke the tension and they all laughed, while Mrs. Bilkins snatched up a fluffy little bunch from the cradle and showed him to his deliverer. The baby cooed and gurgled and stretched out his arms to Joe, who chucked him under the chin.

“Don’t try to come it over me, you young rascal,” he said sternly, but the baby only cooed the more and grabbed at his watch chain.

[46]

“It’s too bad he’s christened already,” smiled Mrs. Bilkins. “If he hadn’t been, we’d name him Joe.”

“What would be the use of putting a hoodoo on the little chap,” protested Joe.

There was a little further conversation and then, although they urged Joe to stay to lunch, he excused himself on the plea that his mother would be waiting for him and started for home.

But his progress homeward was doomed to be slow that day, for he had scarcely gone a block when he was hailed by Dick Talbot, the moving picture operator whom he had had in mind the day before while talking to Professor Crabbe.

“Hello, Joe, old man!” cried Dick, clapping him on the shoulder. “I haven’t seen you for a month of Sundays. How’s tricks?”

Joe returned his greeting with equal warmth, for he had a strong feeling of friendship for that exuberant youth who seemed always to be in good spirits.

“Things are moving all right,” he answered.

“Anything doing in this old burg?” asked Dick.

“Oh, not so much,” was the answer. “You know it’s rather a sleepy old town.”

“Sure thing,” said Dick with a twinkle in his eye. “Nothing doing at all, except chasing crazy men and saving kidnapped babies and little things like that. Oh, yes, it was sleepy yesterday.”

[47]

Joe laughed good-naturedly.

“Trust you to get next to anything that happens,” he said. “You’ve got the nose of a fox for news. Who’s been filling you up?”

“Who hasn’t?” replied Dick with a chuckle. “The whole town is talking of nothing else. They say

that a prophet is not without honor save in his own country, but that doesn't fit your case. You're the whole thing in Riverside.

"But say, Joe," Dick went on jokingly, "why didn't you wait to pull this thing off till I reached town with my little camera. My, what a scene for a moving picture! I'd have given my eyes to have a crack at it. Wild-eyed madman, holding baby above his head; frightened mob in the yard below; handsome young pitcher hurling the ball of ice. Say, I could have made a fortune with that film. All of the managers would have been crazy to get hold of it."

"Oh, cut it out," remonstrated Joe. "The whole bunch of you are making far too much out of it. As for your moving picture stuff, I've got something for you along that line that I'd like to try out if you don't mind."

"Of course I will," answered Dick. "Get it off your chest. What is it?"

"I want you to take a picture of my curve ball," answered Joe.

"It's a pretty swift thing to take," commented Dick. "Still, if we can show a bullet in motion, I [48] guess we can take anything propelled by the brawny arm of Mr. Matson."

"There's a professor in town," explained Joe, "who says it isn't possible to pitch a curve."

"Shades of Arthur Cummings and Bobby Mathews!" groaned Dick. "Are there such fossils still left in the world? Hasn't the old chap ever been to a baseball game?"

"I suppose he has," smiled Joe. "Anyway, he saw me curve some balls yesterday. He admits that it *seems* to curve, but tells me that it is only an optical delusion."

"Listen to that!" exclaimed Dick. "Optical delusion! If that's so, about ten million fans in this country have trouble with their eyesight and ought to see an oculist. Your professor reminds me of the wise Englishman who wrote a book to prove it impossible for a steamer to cross the Atlantic, and the very first boat that crossed brought his book to this country."

"Of course," smiled Joe, "you and I know that he's wrong. But how are we to prove it to him?"

Dick thought hard for a minute or two. He had had to do all sorts of things in the exercise of his profession, and this had developed his natural ingenuity to the point where he was ready to say with Napoleon that there was no such word as "impossible."

"I'll tell you how I think we can fix it!" he exclaimed at length. "We'll put two bamboo poles [49] about ten feet apart and in a direct line between you and the plate. Then you take your stand in the box exactly in a line with both of them. Between the two poles we'll stretch a sheet of white paper. You throw the ball so that it goes to the right of the first pole then turns and breaks the paper and comes out to the left of the second pole. That will be proof positive that the ball has described a curve, and no matter how obstinate the professor is he'll have to admit it."

"Bully!" cried Joe. "That will do the trick all right. When do you think you can do it?"

"Oh, almost any time," answered Dick. "My time is pretty well filled up for today or tomorrow, but if you'll have the thing rigged up by day after tomorrow, I'll come over to the gymnasium and take the picture."

"Fine," said Joe. "That'll suit me to a dot. Suppose we say two o'clock in the afternoon day after tomorrow."

"I'll be there with bells on," declared Dick; and with a final handclasp they separated, and Joe hurried home to his belated dinner.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Momsey," he said to his mother as he kissed her in the hall and hung his hat and coat on the rack, "but it seems to me that I've met the whole population of Riverside this morning. I didn't know the old town had so many people in it." [50]

"I don't wonder they wanted to talk to you, after yesterday," said Mrs. Matson, her bosom swelling with maternal pride. "I thought it would be that way, so I got dinner ready a little later than usual. But come right in now while things are hot."

"That's an invitation I never refuse," said Joe gaily, as with his arm around his mother's waist he went into the dining room. "Hello, what's this?" as his eye fell on a yellow envelope on the mantelpiece.

"It's a telegram that came for you about an hour ago."

"From Reggie again, probably," said Joe, as he tore it open. "Something he forgot to put into the first one. If I keep on getting telegrams, it may pay the company to put in a branch office at the house here."

He ran over the message and his face flushed. Then he read it again as though he could not believe his eyes. Then with a whoop he threw it from him, and catching his mother about the waist whirled her around the room in a wild war dance.

She extricated herself at last, breathless and scandalized.

"Joseph Matson!" she exclaimed, "what on earth is the matter with you? Have you gone crazy?" [51]

"Not a bit of it, Momsey," exulted Joe, "though it wouldn't be surprising if I had. I've been traded to the New York Giants!"

CHAPTER VII

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

If a thunderbolt had fallen it could hardly have created more astonishment.

“What’s that?” cried Clara, who had come into the room just in time to see the last of the mad dance and hear a fragment of what Joe was saying.

“The Giants, Sis!” exclaimed Joe. “The class of the National League! I’m getting right to the top of the ladder! I’m going to play with the finest team in the biggest city on the most famous grounds in the United States! How’s that for a jump?”

“Oh, Joe, that’s splendid!” exclaimed his sister, throwing her arms around his neck. “I’m so proud of this big brother of mine!”

“Will it mean such an awful lot to you, Joe?” asked his delighted mother, who could never get quite clearly in her mind the working of the great national game.

“I should say it would,” returned Joe. “It’s a big advance in a hundred ways. It’s the thing that every player in the country dreams about. There are men who would almost give their eyes to have my chance. It’s getting into the blue-ribbon class. It’s like riding in an automobile after you’ve had to put up with a buggy. It’s like getting a speaking part in a play after you’ve carried a spear as one of the Roman populace. It’s like——”

What heights of eloquence Joe would have reached in his enthusiasm was checked at this moment by the entrance of his father.

“What seems to be the special thing that’s turning all you sensible people into lunatics?” he laughed.

Clara flew to him.

“Oh, Dad!” she exclaimed, “it’s the greatest thing that ever happened. Joe is going to be a member of the New York Giants. He’s just got a telegram telling him about it. Isn’t it glorious?”

Mr. Matson’s face lighted up. More than the women folks he could understand all it was likely to mean to his son.

He wrung Joe’s hand jubilantly.

“I congratulate you with all my heart, my boy,” he said. “It’s a great step forward in your profession and I know you’ll make good on your new team. But how did the matter come about? Didn’t you have any idea that it was in the wind?”

“Not the least in the world,” answered Joe. “The thing’s been carried on so quietly that I haven’t seen it even hinted or whispered in the papers. Of course, they don’t usually go about those things with a brass band, because they’re afraid some other manager may hear about it and try to butt in on his own account. McRae, the manager of the New Yorks, is as foxy as they make them, and he doesn’t let the newspapers get hold of anything till he’s ready to have them. To think that he’s picked me out for his pitching staff!” and Joe again displayed such alarming symptoms of seizing his mother for another whirl that she retreated behind the table.

“Come and eat your dinner, you silly boy,” she smiled fondly. “I suppose you’ll have to do such a simple thing as eating, even if you are going to play on your wonderful New Yorks.”

“Just watch me if you have any doubt about it,” replied Joe, as the happy family seated itself at the table.

As can be imagined, there was only one topic discussed and that was the striking change in Joe’s fortunes and the new vista that was opening up before him.

“Did you ever have any talk with McRae that made you think he might like to have you on his team?” asked his father, as Joe passed his plate for a second helping.

“Not at all,” was the reply. “In the first place I was just a ‘rookie’ last year, and the older men in the league rather stand aloof from the raw beginners. They don’t encourage any familiarity. Not but what McRae has spoken to me though,” he grinned.

“Is that so?” asked his mother with interest. “What did he say?”

“Oh, he stood on the side lines while I was pitching against his team and tried to rattle me,” laughed Joe. “He told me that I was rotten, that I never could pitch, that I ought to go back to the bushes, that I was going up in the air, that I couldn’t see the plate with a telescope, and other little things like that.”

“I think he was just horrid!” exclaimed Mrs. Matson, bristling at the thought of the taunts hurled at her offspring.

“Oh, I didn’t mind it a bit,” chuckled Joe. “It was all in the game. He was simply trying to ride me, to get my goat——”

“Ride you? Get your goat?” repeated his mystified mother.

“You blessed Momsey,” cried Joe. “What I mean to say is that he was trying to get me so excited that I couldn’t pitch well and then his team would win the game. But it didn’t work,” he ended grimly, as he thought of that memorable day when he had pitched the St. Louis team to

victory and dragged the Giants' colors in the dust.

"Now that I come to think of it though," Joe went on, "I remember that the last time I was in [56] New York, I caught him eyeing me pretty sharply while I was sitting on the bench. I didn't think anything of it at the time, as I was all wrapped up in the game, but it may have been that he was sizing me up with just this deal in mind."

"Does the telegram tell you just whom or what you've been traded for?" asked his father.

"No, that's the exasperating thing about it," replied Joe. "It just says that I've been traded to the Giants but it doesn't give any details. I don't even know who sent it except that it comes from some official of the club. I'm anxious to know, not only from curiosity, but because there may have been some money passed in addition to a player, and in that case I may get a little slice of it for myself."

"Somehow, I don't exactly like the use of the word 'traded,'" said Mrs. Matson, reflectively. "It seems to leave your own wishes out of the matter altogether. Of course, in this case you're pleased, but even if you weren't you'd have to submit to it just the same."

"I feel a little the same way," agreed Clara. "It's almost as though you were so much merchandise, a sack of wheat, a ton of coal, or something of that kind."

"Of course, that is one of the unpleasant features of the game," admitted Joe. "But as a matter [57] of fact, it can't be helped. If every one were left free to act entirely for himself, the big leagues would go to pieces in less than no time. Players would be jumping from one team to another every week, and no manager would know what he had to depend on. There's such a tremendous amount of money invested—you couldn't buy out the Giant club at this minute for less than two million dollars—that the men at the head have to take some means to protect themselves. Some of their methods wouldn't stand the test, perhaps, if they were taken to court, but it would be a very foolish player who would seek a court action. If the baseball players are 'slaves,' as they sometimes like to call themselves, they're the most happy and well paid slaves in the world, and there are lots that would like to change places with them and wear their chains."

"Do you suppose you will get a bigger salary than you had in St. Louis?" asked his father.

"It's almost a sure thing that I shall," replied Joe, hopefully. "If I was worth three thousand dollars a year to the Cardinals, even before I had made good, I ought to get at least four thousand or a little more to start with on the Giants."

"Four thousand dollars!" exclaimed Mrs. Matson, who was so used to the modest figures that prevail in a small town that the amount seemed almost a fortune.

"Not many ministers get as much as that, eh Momsey?" joked Joe. [58]

"And that isn't all," he went on without waiting for an answer. "I've got a much better chance to get into the World's Series on the Giants than I would have on the Cardinals. McRae has won several pennants already and it's getting to be a habit with him."

"Is that because he is a so much better manager than those of the other teams?" asked Clara.

"Maybe not altogether," answered Joe reflectively, "though there's no doubt he's one of the very best. He gets a salary of thirty thousand dollars a year"—here Mrs. Matson gasped—"and I guess he's worth it. But he has some advantages that other managers don't have. In the first place, there's unlimited money behind him and if he wants anything that can be bought he goes after it regardless of price. Then too, New York is the best paying town in the whole league, and it's to the interest of the other clubs to see that the New York team is a good one so as to draw the crowds. So that McRae's attempt to strengthen his team doesn't meet with such stiff opposition as some other manager's might. But the chief thing is that he's allowed to run the team without any interference by the owners of the club. He hires or discharges just whom he likes, and they never make a peep. In that way he can maintain discipline over his players, [59] because they know that whatever he says goes. Oh, he's a great manager all right, and I'm mighty glad to have a chance of playing under him."

"Suppose you do happen to get into the World's Series, will it mean much extra money?" asked Clara.

"I should say it would," answered her brother. "After taking out ten per cent. of the receipts for the first four games for the National Commission, sixty per cent. of the balance goes to the winning club and forty per cent. to the losers. That makes anything from three to four thousand apiece for every member of the winning team, and from two to three thousand apiece for each member of the losing team. It's almost like getting another year's salary just for an extra week's work."

"Just that World's Series money alone would be enough to start a nice little home with and settle down to housekeeping," remarked Clara, with a sly glance at her brother.

Joe laughed, a little sheepishly, and again a flood of color swept over his neck and face.

"Never you mind about that," he said loftily. "Plenty of time to think what I'll do with the money after I get it, if I ever do. But at least I've got a great deal better chance than I would have had on the Cardinals. Not but what I hate to leave the old bunch," he added a little soberly. "I've had a [60] mighty good time this last year, and Watson has treated me white. Most of the others, too, were good fellows, especially Rad Chase. I wish he were going along with me."

"The change is going to be a mighty good thing financially," said Mr. Matson. "But leaving out

the money end altogether, how do you figure that it's going to be such an advantage to change from the St. Louis to the New Yorks?"

"Oh, in a heap of ways," replied Joe. "For one thing, I'll be playing before bigger crowds, and that's always an inspiration to a pitcher. Then, too, we're pretty sure to be well up in the race and fighting for the lead, instead of being down in the ruck. You don't know how much difference that makes to a player. Instead of being in the doleful dumps, he's feeling as frisky and gay as a two year old. But the most important thing of all is that with a good club he has smart, snappy fielding behind him, and that makes him feel that he'd pitch his head off to win. With the Giants' brilliant infield behind me, many a hard-hit ball will be turned into an out where with a poorer club it would go as a hit. That helps my percentage. Oh, it will make all the difference in the world. Just watch my record from now on," and Joe swelled out his chest, while Clara mockingly knocked her head on the table to do him reverence.

"Hail to the Giant!" she exclaimed. "Although I don't see that you're any more gigantic than you were before, except that perhaps your head has swelled a little," she added mischievously. [61]

Joe laughed. Laughter came very easily to him today. The world had never seemed so bright to him. Life was decked out in rainbow colors. To be young, to be healthy, to be successful in his chosen calling—what else did he have to ask for?

Just one thing, perhaps. And again he flushed, as he recalled what his sister had said about "settling down to housekeeping."

CHAPTER VIII [62]

THE COMING OF REGGIE

The happy conference had been so animated and there had been so many things to talk about that Joe gave a start when he glanced at his watch.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think it was anywhere near so late as that. I'll have to get a move on, if I'm going to meet Reggie."

"Do you think he'll be here today?" asked Mrs. Matson.

"There's no telling what Reggie will do," laughed Joe. "He's a law unto himself. All that he said in his telegram was that he was coming on. But it's possible for him to get here this afternoon and I have a hunch that he'll be here by the first train he could catch after he sent the wire."

"Of course he'll stay with us while he's in town," said his mother.

"You can be sure that Joe wouldn't let Mabel's brother go to a hotel," put in Clara, demurely.

Joe pretended not to hear.

"I've got some other things to do too," he said, as he rose from the table, "so I guess I'd better be starting." [63]

"What other things?" asked Clara.

"First of all, I've got to get some bamboo poles and rig up things for a moving picture stunt in the gymnasium," replied her brother. "I met Dick Talbot this morning and he promised to come over and take a film of my curve ball in a day or two. Professor Crabbe is as hard to move as the rock of Gibraltar, but I guess he'll pull in his horns after Dick and I show him a thing or two." And much to their amusement, he told them of the controversy he had had with the doughty professor.

"Then too," he went on, "I'll have to practise like the mischief now until I receive notice to start for the training camp. A good deal depends on first impressions, and I want to show McRae that he hasn't picked a lemon."

"Oh, dear," sighed Mrs. Matson, "I hate to hear you talk of going away. I grudge every day you're away from Riverside."

"Never mind, Momsey," said Joe, cheerily, as he kissed her. "It'll be some time before I have to go and, after I do, I'll keep the mails working overtime."

He put on his hat and coat and started out, walking as swiftly and lightly as though he trod on air. The atmosphere was crisp and bracing, his blood coursed strongly through his veins, and the world had never before seemed so good a place to live in. [64]

He turned his steps first toward the gymnasium. He had found this place of the greatest value to him through the winter season. He had not practised so hard that there was danger of his going "stale" before the actual beginning of the season, but he had done just enough work to keep him in superb physical condition and hold the flesh down. There was scarcely an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his bones and he felt as though he could go in the box tomorrow if he were called upon. He never dissipated—had never touched a drop of liquor in his life—and one might have gone a long way before finding a more perfect specimen of the athlete than Joe presented that afternoon.

He found several of his chums awaiting his coming, and of course the first thing he did was to

tell them of the great news that had come to him that morning.

"The New York Giants!"

"Bully for Joe!"

"Some class to old Riverside, eh?"

"They'll win the pennant sure, now!"

"You'll have a look-in at the World's Series, Joe!"

They all crowded round with warm and hearty congratulations and wrung his hand until he winced. [65]

"Don't take my arm off, boys," he laughingly protested. "I need the old soup bone in my business."

"I wish I could tell you all about it, fellows," he went on, in reply to their eager request for particulars, "but honestly, I don't know any more about it than you do yet. I suppose I'll get a contract to sign in a day or two, and perhaps there'll be something about it in the New York papers when they get here tomorrow morning. All I know now is that I'm going to play this year in New York. That is," he jested, "unless McRae finds out he's been buncoed and fires me."

"Swell chance of anything like that!" exclaimed Tom Davis. "I'll bet you'll take your regular turn in the box from the very start."

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Joe. "McRae puts a great deal of faith in his veterans, and the chances are I'll have to warm the bench until some of the others fall down. You know how it was with Markwith, the 'eleven thousand dollar beauty.' McRae kept him on the bench for nearly two years, scarcely using him at all, but giving him a chance to learn the 'inside stuff' by watching the others. Then when he was ripe, McRae put him in and he went through the league like a prairie fire. He may do the same thing with me."

"Stuff and nonsense," declared Tom, loyally. "You're as good a pitcher now as Markwith ever dared to be. Besides Markwith came from a minor league while you've already had a year's experience in the National League with St. Louis." [66]

"I'm afraid it's your friendship rather than your judgment that's talking now, Tom," answered Joe. "Markwith has won nineteen straight, right off the reel, and that's some little record, let me tell you. But I surely am going to do my best, not only on my account but so as not to disappoint my old friends. Take off your coat now and I'll toss you up a few just to get my wing good and supple."

Tom complied, and there was some spirited pitching practice which demonstrated that Joe was in fine fettle. All his curves worked finely, and there was a world of speed behind the high fast ball that he occasionally cut loose.

"I'm afraid I'll have to stop now," said Joe reluctantly, after half an hour of good practice, as he looked at his watch. "I've got to stop at Brigg's store to get a couple of bamboo poles, and then I have to go down to the station to meet a friend whom I rather expect by the four-thirty-five. I'm sorry, too, for I'm just getting warmed up and I'd like to keep going for an hour yet."

He said goodby to his chums, and, after having stopped in the store to make his purchases, strolled down to the railroad station, to await the possible coming of Reggie. He was eager to find out all the meaning of the queer message he had received, and it is barely possible that he was still more eager to have some tidings of Reggie's sister. [67]

He had to cool his heels in the depot for some time, as the train was late, and it was fully an hour after its usual time when it finally rolled into the station.

There were several day coaches and but one parlor car, and Joe made his way straight toward this, knowing that Reggie, who looked for the best in everything, would travel in no other.

In the first few who came down the steps he noted no familiar figure, and he was beginning to think that Reggie for some reason had deferred his trip when he caught sight of that young man coming leisurely from the Pullman. If he had not seen the face he would have had a moral certainty that it was Reggie, for he was dressed in an extreme of style that was not at all common in the quiet little town of Riverside.

Reggie was an amiable young man who could not by any stretch of imagination be described as an intellectual giant. Many in fact would have had no hesitation in classing him as a "lightweight." But he had many qualities that redeemed his foppishness, chief among which, in Joe's estimation, was that he was a rabid baseball "fan," and above all was the brother of Mabel. This last would alone have been capable, like charity, of covering a multitude of sins. [68]

He had a tiny little moustache curled up at the ends that gushing girls would have described as "darling," his clothes were a suit of English tweeds, and he had an accent and a vocabulary that he made as English as possible.

"Hullo, old top!" he exclaimed, as he saw Joe. "I'm awfully glad to see you, don't you know. It was no end good of you to come down to meet me, especially as I hadn't told you just when I was coming."

"That's all right, Reggie," smiled Joe, as he grasped his hand cordially. "I knew you must have been rather cut up when you sent that telegram and forgot to tell me the train you were taking. But it seems like old times to see you again. How's every one down at Goldsboro?"

“Fine as silk,” responded Reggie. “If I hadn’t had to rush off in such a hurry, I’d have brought Mabel along with me just for the trip. She’s awfully anxious to see your sister, Clara, don’t you know. It’s astonishing how those girls have taken to each other.”

“Clara feels the same way,” responded Joe warmly. “She’s done little else but talk of Mabel since the last time she was here. But give me your check, old man, and I’ll attend to your baggage. Of course you’ll stop with us while you are here. That goes without saying.” [69]

Reggie made a feeble protest as a matter of form, saying that he ought to go to the hotel, but he readily submitted to be overruled by Joe. The latter tossed the check to the station hackman with instructions to get Reggie’s valise, and when this was done the two friends took the hack and were whirled through the quiet streets to Joe’s home.

By tacit consent, neither spoke of the real object of Reggie’s visit to Riverside just then. There would be plenty of time for that when they should be alone after supper and have nothing to interrupt them.

“Beastly cold weather, what?” said Reggie, as he turned up the collar of his overcoat.

“It is pretty sharp,” agreed Joe; “but nothing to what it was the last time you were here. That was a blizzard for fair. Remember how we were all upset in the snow when we were trying to get to town from the train stalled in a snowdrift?”

“I remember, all right,” laughed Reggie. “We certainly had a fight for life that night.”

“And what a thoroughbred your sister was that night,” continued Joe, who was always anxious to bring the conversation round to Mabel. “Where lots of girls would have gone into hysterics, she was as cool and brave as any man could have been.”

“Mabel has class,” agreed Reggie carelessly. “I recall how she held the horses’ heads while we were righting the sleigh. Some plucky girl!” [70]

“You bet she is!” responded Joe, with an enthusiasm that might have seemed suspicious to Reggie if the latter had not been so wrapped up in his own affairs that his talk with Joe was rather absent-minded and made no strong impression on him.

Joe was not long in discovering that Reggie’s trouble, whatever it was, sat heavily on him. He relapsed into monosyllables until the Matson home was reached.

The hearty welcome he received from all the members of the family thawed him out somewhat, and during the meal that followed—a meal into which Mrs. Matson had put all her housewifely skill because of the expected guest—he was more like the gay, care-free Reggie that they had previously known.

He was especially delighted to know of the change in Joe’s fortunes, and congratulated him heartily on his transfer to New York.

“If you work for them as well as you worked against them, there’ll be no kick coming on the part of McRae,” he prophesied. “In that last game you played in New York you had the Giants eating out of your hand.”

“Let’s see,” said Joe, with affected carelessness, “your sister was with you that time, wasn’t she?” [71]

“You’d think she was if you heard how many times she’s referred to that game since then,” answered the unsuspecting Reggie. “Mabel always did like to see a good game, but this last year or so, she’s become more of a fan than ever.”

Clara, glancing at her brother, felt that she could make a shrewd guess why Mabel had developed such an increased interest in baseball, but the presence of Reggie put a spoke in her eager desire to tease Joe for the fun of seeing him blush.

“You’re lucky to have the thing happen just now, when the fans are beginning to get hungry for baseball news,” commented Reggie. “The newspapers will play up the deal for all that it is worth, and your picture and record will be on every big sporting page in the country.”

“Perhaps that won’t be an unmixed blessing,” laughed Joe. “It’ll make the public expect too much, and the disappointment will be all the greater if I don’t make good.”

“I’ll take chances on that,” replied Reggie emphatically. “There isn’t a better aim than yours in the league, and the whole country will be ready to admit it before the season is over.”

The talk ran on pleasantly for an hour or two after the supper was over. Clara played and sang, and Reggie dutifully turned her music for her and made himself agreeable to Mrs. Matson. But all felt that Reggie had a revelation to make to Joe, and as soon as courtesy would permit the other members of the family said good night and left the two young men to themselves. [72]

There was a cozy open fire burning in the grate and they drew up their easy chairs before its cheerful glow, facing each other.

“Now, Reggie,” said Joe, with a quizzical smile, “tell me the sad story of your life. Go to it, old man. Tell me about Talham Tabbs.”

CHAPTER IX [73]

Reggie flushed and gave a little uneasy laugh. For one who usually had a very good opinion of himself, he seemed singularly embarrassed.

"The truth is, old top," he said, "I scarcely know where to begin. I'm afraid I've been a fool, don't you know."

"Nonsense," said Joe encouragingly. "We all make mistakes. The fool is not the man who makes a mistake but the one who makes the same mistake twice. The perfectly wise man has never yet been born. At least, if he has I've never met him."

"It's awfully good of you to talk that way," replied Reggie, "and it makes it easier for me to tell you what I've got to say. But before I go any further, let me ask you one question: Have you seen anything of that Talham Tabbs I mentioned in my telegram?"

"Yes," answered Joe nonchalantly. "I saw him for the first time yesterday. Rather unexpected meeting it was, too, for a fact."

"Where did you see him?" asked Reggie eagerly. [74]

"On top of a lumber pile," was the answer.

"On top of a lumber pile?" repeated his friend, with a puzzled air. "What on earth was he doing there?"

"Swinging a baby above his head and threatening to throw it down on the railroad track," replied Joe.

Reggie stared blankly at Joe, as though he thought he was suddenly bereft of reason.

"I never was good at riddles, old chap," he said. "Tell me just what you are driving at."

And then Joe told him all the happenings of the day before, while Reggie looked at him with open-eyed wonder.

"And you brought him down with the first shot," he marveled. "That aim of yours is certainly a pippin. McRae made no mistake when he got you on his staff."

"It was a case of touch and go," remarked Joe. "I simply *had* to get him on that first try. If I'd missed him then, I'd never have had a chance for a second shot."

"I'm glad the poor beggar wasn't badly hurt," said Reggie. "Are you sure that he's perfectly safe down in the jail?" he added as an afterthought.

"I don't see where he could be much safer," answered Joe. "Old Hank Bailey hasn't any more [75] brains than the law allows, but I guess he'll keep him right and tight. Besides, he was strapped to the bed when I saw him this morning. I gave Hank a special tip to be on the watch, and I guess we don't have to worry about laying our hands on him when we want him."

"That's good!" ejaculated Reggie, with a sigh of relief. "I'm beginning to see daylight now."

"Well, now," said Joe, "that I've told you all I know, suppose you loosen up and tell me just why you're so interested in the doings of Talham Tabbs."

"I will," answered Reggie, "and you'll be the first living soul to know anything about it outside of Tabbs and myself. I haven't even told Mabel about it, though she and I have been close pals ever since we were children. And as for breathing a word of it to the governor——" Here Reggie spread out his hands in a gesture that was more eloquent than words.

Joe thought to himself that he could very readily understand why Reggie might shrink from revealing anything to the stern, gruff father, of whom he had caught an occasional glimpse; but when it came to the womanly sympathy of Mabel it was different.

"You see," went on Reggie, "I've been thinking for some time that I ought to settle down—make [76] something of myself—go into business of some kind or other—what?"

Joe had privately long had a similar feeling about Reggie. What he had seen of his friend had shown him a young man who was seeking the froth of life rather than the substance, chasing the phantom of pleasure rather than facing the sober realities of things as they are. Had he been any one else than the brother of Mabel, Joe would simply have classed him as a social butterfly and let it go at that. As it was, he had excused a lot of things because of his youth, and now he was sincerely glad to learn that Reggie was taking a more sensible view of life.

"That's the way to look at it, old man," he said approvingly. "There's nothing in this society stuff."

"So I went to the governor," continued Reggie, "and told him what I had in mind. The trouble is, dad has been too good to me. Had a pretty rough time of it when he was young—poverty, hard work, and all that—and he had promised himself that his son, if he ever had one, shouldn't have so hard a time of it as he had had. So he gave me everything I wanted—plenty of money, a tour of Europe, motor boat, automobile, and all that sort of thing, don't you know. I suppose later on he expects to take me into business with him, but he hasn't been in any hurry about it. Funny, isn't [77] it, how hard-headed men look at those things sometimes when their children are concerned?"

Joe nodded. He had known of more than one instance where, through some strange blindness, men who had risen to wealth by their own endeavors had been unwilling that their boys should

have the same hard but wholesome experience.

“He laughed at me at first,” Reggie went on, “and tried to joke the matter off. But when he saw that I was in earnest it set him thinking. Then he looked at me in that quizzical way of his and said:

“‘I tell you what I’ll do, Son: I’m willing to take a chance just to see what stuff there is in you. Just as one throws a puppy into deep water so that the pup will either have to swim or drown, I’m going to throw you into financial waters and give you a chance to make good or go under.’

“He went to his safe, twirled the combination, and came back to me with a package. He ripped off a rubber band, and I saw that the package was a big bunch of securities.

“‘Now, Reggie, my boy,’ he said, ‘here’s where you show me what there is in that noddle of yours. These securities have a value of ten thousand dollars. They’re bonds of the A. K. T. Railroad. It’s one of the safest and best managed roads in the country, and these are as good as government bonds. I’m going to put these absolutely in your hands to do with precisely as you [78] like. Turn them into cash, pledge them, sell them, invest them—do anything you want to with them. At the end of a year come to me and tell me just what you’ve done and just what profit you’ve made, if any, from the use of them. In the meantime, I’ll give you a free hand and won’t ask you a word about them.

“‘Of course,’ he went on, ‘they’re a five-per cent. bond, and you could make five hundred dollars by merely clipping the interest coupons and presenting them when they come due. But that isn’t my idea. Any fool could use a pair of scissors. What I want you to do is to use the money, put it to work, mix it with brains, and at the end of a year come to me and show me the results.’

“You can bet that I was well stumped. You could have knocked me down with a feather.”

“I should say so!” ejaculated Joe, with a low whistle. “Ten thousand dollars! That’s an awful lot of money to have plumped down before you and to be told that it’s all yours to do with exactly as you like.”

“That’s what I told the governor as soon as I could get my breath,” said Reggie. “But he only laughed and said that he had earned it and that what he did with it was no one’s business but his own. The only condition was that I shouldn’t use it for anything except to make more. Said my [79] allowance would go on as usual, so that I wouldn’t have to use any of the ten thousand for my living expenses.”

“Great Scott, Reggie, that was a wonderful chance for a young fellow!” cried Joe, who had grown hugely interested in the story of this favorite of fortune. “What have you done with the ten thousand?”

“What have I done with it?” echoed Reggie ruefully. “I gave it to Talham Tabbs.”

“What!” shouted Joe, jumping to his feet so violently that he overturned his chair. “What’s that you say?”

“I gave it to Talham Tabbs,” repeated Reggie, averting his eyes from those of his friend as he made the startling confession.

“But why—what——” stammered Joe blankly.

“Just to prove that an old proverb is true,” was the answer.

“What proverb?”

“‘A fool and his money are soon parted,’” replied Reggie bitterly.

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[80]

CHAPTER X

REGGIE CONFESSES

Joe resumed his seat, too astounded to know what to do or say under the circumstances.

“Beg pardon for being so brusque, old fellow,” he remarked, “but really you took the ground from under my feet. What on earth led you to give your money to a man who is as mad as a March hare?”

“I’ve asked myself that same question many times since the thing happened,” answered Reggie drearily, “and the only answer I can find is that I must have been the more insane of the two.

“It’s only fair to say, though,” he went on, “that at the time I ran across him there wasn’t a trace of insanity about him. He seemed to me to be one of the cleverest men I ever met. Others thought so too, so perhaps I’m not so very much to blame after all.”

“Where and when did you first meet him?” asked Joe.

“At the Goldsboro Country Club,” answered Reggie. “You know that our folks have membership [81] there and I run out very often. I was out there one day watching a tennis tournament when this Tabbs came strolling along and spoke to me. There seemed to be something familiar about his face and yet I couldn’t quite place him until he said he had met me one time at Morgan &

Company's in New York. Then I remembered him perfectly. I had gone down to the city on a trip with my father, and as he had business with the Morgan people, he took me along with him. Tabbs was holding an important position with the firm at the time, and he seemed to take quite a liking to me. Took me out to lunch with him and then showed me around the city. That was two or three years ago, and I hadn't seen him since until he came to me at the Country Club.

"Of course, it was up to me to give him as good a time as I could, in return for what he had done for me in New York, and I did. Introduced him to lots of the best people in Goldsboro, took him home with me and had him stay with me for a day or two, and whizzed him about the country in my automobile. To tell the truth, it wasn't hard to entertain him, for he was a bright and amusing talker and seemed in every way to be an all-around good fellow."

"How did he happen to be so far away from New York City and right in the busy season, too?" asked Joe.

"That struck me as rather queer," replied Reggie, "but he explained by saying that he was on a [82] secret mission for his firm. Awfully mysterious and all that, don't you know. Of course, the more mysterious he was the more curious I became. I suppose he figured on that. Anyway, after a lot of hinting and fencing about, he came right out one day and said that he was going to take me into his confidence, that I was too good a fellow to leave on the outside when I might get in on the ground floor, and a lot of rot like that, don't you know."

"I know, all right," said Joe, with a smile. "I've had lots of tips about big things that were going to be pulled off and been urged to get aboard while there was time. Ball players are known to get good salaries, and they're deluged with circulars and market tips of all kinds. But I never yet tried to beat Wall Street at its own game. You know what they say of it, that 'it's a crooked street with a graveyard at one end of it and a river at the other.'"

"I guess that description fits it, all right," agreed his friend, "but of course I thought that Tabbs was different from an ordinary market tipster. I had seen him holding down a big job with Morgan & Company, and I naturally thought he had inside information."

Joe had to admit that this was reasonable.

"He put me under a pledge of secrecy," went on Reggie, "and then he opened up. Said that [83] Morgan & Company had a big scheme for combining under one control all the electric light and power companies of the State. Claimed that he already had an agreement with the majority of them to come into the deal. The thing was to be kept under cover until everything was ripe, and then the stock would double and treble in value, and the lucky holders would make a fortune. Now was the time to buy before the big news came out."

"Old stuff," thought Joe to himself, although he did not give utterance to the thought for fear of wounding Reggie, who was sore enough already.

"Of course," went on Reggie, "the first thing I thought of was the ten thousand in stocks that the governor had put in my hands to show what I could do. Here was the chance to make it twenty or thirty thousand or more, if Tabbs was right. And honest, Joe, that fellow could have convinced anybody. He was the most persuasive talker I ever met. Had facts and figures at his tongue's end and reeled them off by the thousand. Showed me a chart of his own on which he had marked all the market fluctuations on leading stocks for ten years back. Had an answer for every objection. He was a perfect encyclopedia on everything that concerned stocks and bonds. If ever any man knew his business, it was Talham Tabbs."

And Joe, recalling the keen face of the madman, could very well understand how Reggie would [84] be putty in his hands.

"The upshot of it all was," blurted out the dudish young man desperately, "that I put the whole ten thousand in his hands to turn into cash and invest for me in the securities of the different light and power companies. He was to do this quietly and secretly as he went from one place to another, and then when he had invested it all he was to turn them over to me to hold them for the rise that would come as soon as the deal was concluded.

"I didn't do this right off the reel. I felt skittish about putting all my eggs in one basket. I wanted to put in part of the money only, but he laughed at me. Opportunity only came once to a man, he said, especially such an opportunity as that. I was dazzled by his figures, and when I thought of the pleasure it would be to prove to my father that I had more brains than he gave me credit for and knew how to double and treble my money in a few months, I gave in and went into the thing, hook, line and sinker."

"Too bad, old fellow," consoled Joe, who was moved to pity by the distress that showed in his friend's face. "What happened then?"

"He went away a few days later," continued Reggie. "Had to go to Raleigh, he said, to see some [85] members of the legislature. He wrote to me every few days and told me he was getting along famously. Then his letters stopped. I didn't think so much of this at first, because I knew he would be tremendously busy putting through the deal. But when three weeks passed without hearing from him I got uneasy. I wrote to him to the address of Morgan & Company, thinking they would of course know his whereabouts and forward his mail to him, and you can imagine how I felt when I got my letter back marked 'Not here.' I wrote then to the firm direct, and asked about Talham Tabbs. They wrote back promptly that Tabbs had once been employed by them and that they had valued him as one of their most competent men, but that a year before he had gone suddenly insane and had to be committed to an asylum. They gave me the name of the asylum so that I could write there if I wished to learn anything further about his condition, although they

had been informed that his case was thought to be incurable.

"I tell you what, old man, that knocked me all in a heap. My ten thousand dollars had been put in the care of a crazy man, who, for all I knew, had turned the securities into cash and by this time might be in Canada, or Europe, or South America, or any old place."

"It must have been a knockout blow," said Joe.

"For a little while I thought I would go crazy myself," continued Reggie. "I couldn't eat or sleep, [86]
and the folks saw there was something the matter with me. Mabel was worried out of her head, and tried to get me to tell her what was the trouble."

"Just like Mabel," thought Joe to himself, conscious of a sudden warmth in the region of his heart.

"I think the governor rather suspected that something had gone wrong in a money way," continued Reggie. "But he's a thoroughbred, and since he had said he wouldn't ask me about it for a year, he stuck to his promise."

"Couldn't you pick up any clue as to Tabbs' whereabouts?" queried Joe.

"Not a thing for a long while," was the answer. "Of course, I was handicapped because I had to keep everything under cover. The first thing I did was to make a trip to the asylum where he had been confined. The superintendent told me that Tabbs had escaped about two months before. Said he was one of the brightest and ablest men that had ever been confined there. There would be weeks at a time when he would appear to be as sane as any man. Then he would have sudden fits of violence come upon him, when they couldn't do anything with him and had to truss him up in a strait-jacket to keep him from harming the other inmates. I suppose he must have had one of [87]
those spells come on him when he carried off the baby."

"I suppose so," said Joe with a shudder, as the thought of the narrow escape came up before him.

"The superintendent told me that they had been hunting for him ever since he got away but hadn't got a trace of him. I told him then that I had met him and that he was still going by his right name. Naturally I didn't tell him what a fool Tabbs had made of me. He was delighted to get the information I gave him and said that he would follow up the clue at once. I didn't rely wholly on that, however, and on the quiet I put the matter in the hands of a detective agency."

"Did that help you out any?" asked Joe.

"Not a bit," replied Reggie disgustedly. "All they sent me was a bill for services rendered, although they kept hinting that they were right on his heels. They must have been a pretty nimble pair of heels, though, because they always got away. Don't talk to me of detectives. 'Defectives' would be a better name for them."

"How did you find out then that he might be at Riverside?" asked Joe with lively curiosity.

"By the merest chance in the world," replied Reggie. "I was in Wilmington and when I went to the hotel and started to register I turned over the leaves to see if any of my friends were there and caught sight of Tabbs' name. Of course I made inquiries in a hurry, and the clerk told me [88]
that he had left a week before. I went to the station and found that a man answering to his description had bought a ticket and had his baggage checked through to Riverside. Then I sent the telegram and followed it as soon as I could. Now you know the whole story."

"Well," said Joe, drawing a long breath, "it's pretty bad, but it might have been worse. Now that we have Tabbs where the dogs can't bite him, you have a chance to get your money back."

"Yes," agreed Reggie, "but after all it's only a chance. No knowing what he may have done with it by this time."

"Would he have had any trouble in turning the securities into cash?" asked Joe.

"Not the least in the world," was the answer. "They are as easily handled almost as if they were United States currency. The mere possession of them is regarded as proof of ownership. He could go to any bank or big brokerage house in the country and turn them into cash at five minutes' notice."

"Well, even if he did, he may have all, or nearly all, of the money left," said Joe hopefully. "Sol Cramer, the landlord at the hotel, said that he had a big roll of bills when he paid for his week's board. He can't spend any of it where he is now, at any rate."

They discussed the matter for an hour or more and then Joe insisted that Reggie ought to get to [89]
bed.

"You've had a long journey," he remarked, as he rose to show his friend to his room, "and you need a good night's rest so as to be fit when you tackle Talham Tabbs in the morning."

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[90]

CHAPTER XI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

It was bright and early the next morning when the two friends sallied forth right after

breakfast. The air had a tang and sting to it that sent the blood coursing swiftly through their veins, and the delicious buckwheat cakes for which Mrs. Matson was famous formed no small element in their general sense of well-being.

“Now for Talham Tabbs!” exclaimed Reggie. “I’ll bet he’ll be stumped at seeing me again. He thinks I’m hundreds of miles from here, if he thinks of me at all. I’m mighty curious to see how he’ll carry things off.”

“He seems to be an artist at carrying things off,” laughed Joe, with a sly poke in Reggie’s ribs.

“You’re right there,” grinned Reggie, who could take a joke. “But you can bet if I get that bunch of securities back, it’ll have to be more than an artist who’ll get it away from me again. It’ll have to be a magician, at the very least.”

“I’ve been wondering what we’ll do,” he continued, “if the fellow refuses to talk.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that,” answered Joe. “He’ll probably realize that the jig is up and make a [91] clean breast of the whole thing. If he doesn’t I’ll try my ‘secret society’ gag and see if it will work the second time. It worked like a charm once and may again.”

They had to pass the hotel, and Sol Cramer, who was standing just inside the door, motioned them to come in.

“Haven’t a minute to stop, Sol,” explained Joe, as they stepped inside. “I’m going down to the jail with this friend of mine who has special business with that crazy man. We may stop for a minute on our way back. We’ll have a little time to spare then. What’s up?”

“I won’t keep you long,” said Sol, after acknowledging Joe’s introduction of Reggie. “I just thought you might like to take a squint at the New York papers. They’ve just got in, and the sporting pages are full of that deal that puts you on the Giants.”

Joe was getting used by this time to having his picture and his name in the papers, but it was with an especial thrill that he noted how much space was bestowed on him and the flattering terms that the reporters had used in describing his prowess as a pitcher.

Flaring headlines headed each article in the various papers:

[92]

McRAE STRENGTHENS HIS PITCHING STAFF.

THE BIGGEST DEAL OF THE YEAR.

Giants’ Prospects Brighten.—Now for the Pennant!

Below each headline was an extended story, sketching Joe’s career from the time he had entered Yale up to the present, and all of them dwelling on his last year’s work with St. Louis, and the splendid game he had pitched against the Giants at the wind-up of the season. All agreed that it was this game that had clinched McRae’s determination to have Joe on his team.

“You seem to be the whole cheese,” remarked Sol, with a grin. “Just now you’re the most distinguished citizen of Riverside.”

“I’m afraid they’re spreading it on too thick,” said Joe, who knew how precarious was a baseball reputation. “By the end of the year they may be calling me a ‘has-been’ and roasting McRae for getting me on the team.”

“I’ll take a chance on that,” replied Sol confidently. “You’ve been going up the ladder steadily and you’re bound to climb higher. A fellow with your habits is good for ten or fifteen years yet in the big leagues—maybe twice as long as that.”

“That’s what!” chimed in Reggie emphatically. “It’s the old rounders who trail along with drink [93] and who gamble that go back to the bushes. If a man lives straight and cuts out the booze, he can last as long in baseball as in anything else. Even after he gets a little too old for playing, there are plenty of splendid jobs as managers.”

“That’s right, too,” confirmed Sol. “Look at Griff and Clarkey and Jenn and Connie. Why, those fellows are getting enormous salaries!”

“Well, that’s looking a long way ahead,” laughed Joe. “Just at present my job is to make good as pitcher for the Giants, and I’ve got my work cut out for me to do it. But we’ll have to go now, Sol. Thank you for showing me the papers.”

“Save a copy of each of them for me,” said Reggie. “I’ll stop and get them on my way back. I want to cut them out and send them to Mabel,” he explained to Joe, as he hurried away. “She’s so interested in baseball news, you know.”

Joe knew, and he hoped that the interest had in it more of a personal touch than her brother seemed to suspect.

A few minutes’ brisk walk brought them to the jail, and Joe gave a vigorous tug at the bell.

They cooled their heels for two minutes without any response, and Reggie became somewhat impatient.

"Your jailer doesn't seem to be an early riser," he remarked. "What's the matter with him?" [94]

"Oh, Hank Bailey was never known to do anything in a hurry," chuckled Joe. "Besides, he hasn't any helper here except his wife, and I suppose he's busy in some other part of the jail."

Just then the door opened and Hank appeared. But it was a very different Hank from the boastful and self-confident individual of the day before. He nodded gloomily to Joe, and stared at his companion.

"What's the matter, Hank?" questioned Joe. "You look as though you had lost the last friend you had on earth. Cheer up, the worst is yet to come."

"The worst has come already," responded Hank gloomily.

"What do you mean?" demanded Joe, in quick alarm.

"That crazy man has skipped!" blurted out Hank desperately, with the air of a man who wants to tell the bad news quickly and have it over with.

"What?" shouted Joe and Reggie in chorus.

"That's what I said," asserted Hank doggedly.

"When did he escape?" cried Joe, his anger rising.

"How did you come to let him get away from you?" demanded Reggie.

"You don't suppose I let him go on purpose, do you?" snarled Hank, driven to bay. "He knocked me down and shut the cell door on me, and that's the last I saw of him." [95]

"Now look here, Hank," said Joe, who had gotten control of himself now that the first shock of surprise was over, "this is a serious thing. You've got to pull yourself together and think quick, talk quick, and act quick. Tell us now just what happened."

"It was this way," explained Hank, his sluggish nature spurred on somewhat by Joe's sharp, decided tone. "He seemed all right when I went the rounds for the last time last night. Was just as gentle as a lamb. This morning, when I went in to take him his breakfast he was asleep, as far as I could make out. I stooped over to put the tray on the bench, when he suddenly jumped up and fetched me a clip under the chin that knocked me down, me not looking for anything of the kind. Before I could get to my feet, he'd dashed out the cell and shut the door on me. It shuts with a spring lock, and my keys were on the outside. Then he gives an awful laugh and runs down the corridor, and I suppose he let himself out of the front door. I hammered on the cell door and yelled until my wife heard me and came and let me out."

"How long ago did all this happen?" asked Joe.

"About half an hour ago," answered Hank. [96]

"I thought you had him strapped to the bed," said Reggie.

"So he was, but he had his watch and he broke the crystal and sawed away at the straps until they broke. I've just been looking over them."

"But why haven't you given an alarm?" demanded Joe. "Don't you realize that a dangerous lunatic is at large and may kill somebody any minute?"

"I was just getting ready to," answered Hank. "The truth is that I'm so dizzy and flabbergasted that I don't rightly know whether I'm on my head or my heels."

It was clear that it would not do to depend on the jailer, and Joe took the matter in his own hands.

"Come along, Reggie," he cried. "The first thing is to get downtown and give the alarm. Then we'll set the telegraph and the telephone going and organize a searching party. He can't have gotten so very far away, and the chances are that we'll get him yet. Come along."

They hurried down to the office of the chief of police and told their story. The fire bell was rung, a thing that was done only in the case of a fire or an escape from jail, to put the people on their guard. The news spread like wildfire through the town. From telephone headquarters they [97] called up every town within a radius of twenty miles and described the fugitive. Joe hurriedly called a number of his friends together, and in a few minutes automobiles and sleighs were dashing along every road that led out from town. They inquired at every farmhouse, questioned every passing traveler, fairly combed the surrounding country. All that day and far into the night they worked like troopers, only to return at last weary and defeated.

Talham Tabbs had vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up!

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[98]

CHAPTER XII

THE CALL TO BATTLE

It was a week later and Joe was returning from the post-office where he had stopped for the late afternoon mail.

Reggie had left the day before, although Joe had urged him to remain longer. But a clue had

come from another State that, slender as it was, seemed to offer some chance of running down the elusive Tabbs, and Reggie had felt that he ought to follow it up.

"It's too bad, old man," Joe had said to him, as he stood on the station platform bidding the dudish young man goodby, "to have come so near to finding your man and yet just miss him."

"Oh, it's all in the game!" Reggie had answered, assuming a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. "I have a hunch that I'll run across him yet and bring him to a show-down."

"I'll keep my eyes wide open, too," Joe assured him, "and if I find out anything that will be of the slightest help I'll let you know at once."

[99] But it was not of Reggie that Joe was thinking, as he hurried home through the dusk of the short winter afternoon. For he carried in his hand a big official-looking letter that bore on the upper left-hand corner the name of the New York Baseball Club.

He felt sure that it contained the contract, concerning which there had been so much speculation in the Matson home for the last few days. But eager as he was to know what it contained, he had restrained himself until he reached home, so that all could read it together.

"Here it is at last, Momsey!" he shouted, as he burst into the warm bright sitting room waving the envelope above his head.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" began his mother fondly, while Clara was across the room like a whirlwind and snatching at the letter.

"Open it up, open it up!" she pleaded. "I'm nearly crazy to know what's in it."

"Little girls should be seen and not heard," teased her brother, as he held it tantalizingly out of her reach.

But she tickled him under his arm so that he dropped it with such undignified haste that she got possession of the letter, and like a flash had put the table between them.

Into the laughing group came Mr. Matson, just returned from the Harvester Works.

"What's all the racket about?" he asked.

[100] "Oh, Dad!" cried Clara, running to him and putting her arms about his neck. "It's the letter from the New York Club, and it has Joe's contract in it, and now we'll know all about it and whether it's for one year or three years, and——"

"It seems to me that you're quite a prophetess, young lady," laughed her father, as he sat down in his easy-chair and drew her to his lap, "especially as the letter hasn't been opened yet."

"Perhaps it's just a note telling me that after thinking it over they don't want me after all," teased Joe.

"Well, now that we're all here, suppose you settle the question by reading it," suggested Mrs. Matson.

There was a moment of breathless suspense and it must be admitted that Joe's hand was not quite steady as he tore open the envelope. There was a big formal document inside, and as Joe unfolded it a little blue slip fluttered out and fell to the floor. Clara was on it in an instant.

"It's a check!" she exclaimed, with a little squeal of delight. "That looks a lot as if they didn't want you, eh, Mr. Joseph Matson?"

It was a check for one hundred dollars to cover traveling expenses to the training camp.

[101] Joe cleared his throat and began to read the formidable-looking document. It abounded with any number of "wherefores" and "whereases," but the sum and substance of it was that the New York Club agreed to pay Joseph Matson the sum of four thousand five hundred dollars a year, for a period of three years from date.

Joe looked up at this point to see three shining pairs of eyes fixed upon him, although a suspicious moisture threatened to dim the brightness of those belonging to his mother and his sister.

"Four thousand five hundred dollars!" exclaimed Mr. Matson. "That's an advance of fifteen hundred dollars over what you got last year. They certainly do things up in liberal style."

"And that isn't all," cried Joe eagerly, as his eyes fell on a paragraph near the bottom of the page. "Here's a bonus clause."

"A bonus clause?" interrupted Clara. "What is that?"

"Something they offer as a premium if you do more than is expected of you," explained her brother. "This says that I'll get an extra thousand dollars if I win twenty games during the season."

"That ought to be easy enough, I should think," said Clara.

[102] "Don't you believe it," laughed Joe. "In the first place, if it were easy they wouldn't offer me anything extra for doing it. A pitcher is doing very well who wins two-thirds of the games he pitches. On that basis I'd have to pitch thirty games to have a chance of winning twenty. But if his old pitchers are going strong, McRae may keep me on the bench half the season and only put me in when they fall down. He's a great one for depending on his old standbys. Then, too, I'll be a newcomer, and perhaps the team won't play behind me with the same confidence as when Hughson or Markwith are on the mound. That will make it harder for me to win games. You must

remember, too, that all the teams on the circuit play harder against the New Yorks than they do against any other team. They take a special delight in downing the Giants before their home crowds, and they always save up their best pitchers for those occasions. So, take it altogether, there's only a mere chance to win my twenty games during the season. I'm going to take that chance, though," and into Joe's eyes came a steely look that would have delighted McRae if that fighting leader of the Giants could have seen it.

The precious document was read and reread and discussed in all its bearings until Mrs. Matson insisted that supper would be stone cold if they did not come to the table at once. It is safe to say that in all Riverside that night no happier family grouped itself around the table than that in the Matson home.

"What's the idea of the three-year clause, Joe?" asked his father, when they had fairly settled [103] down to the meal. "Rather a compliment, I take it."

"It is a sort of compliment," admitted Joe. "They must feel pretty sure there's something in me to bind themselves to pay that salary for so long a time. I didn't really expect more than a one-year contract. Of course there's another side to it. If I did especially well this first year, perhaps they figure I'd get a swelled head and hold them up for a big increase next year. As it is, no matter how well I do, I can't get any more salary until the three-year period is up.

"Then too," he went on, as he passed his plate for another helping, "there's been a good deal of talk lately about this third big league. They're awfully anxious to get star players so as to draw the public from the start, and the only way they can get them is to coax them away from the National or the American League. To do that they'll have to offer enormous salaries. If I were bound for one year and the new league wanted me, they might try to get me to promise to join them as soon as my year was up. But with a three-year contract holding me, McRae won't have to worry."

"Those clubs must be awfully rich to tie themselves up for such an amount of money," remarked Mrs. Matson. "Suppose a player lost his skill. Would they have to go on paying him just [104] the same?"

"Not by a jugful," laughed Joe. "There's a little joker in the contract that permits the club to release a player on ten days' notice."

"But you can't quit *them* on ten days' notice!" exclaimed Clara. "It doesn't seem to me that that's fair."

"It isn't fair on the face of it," admitted Joe, "but as a matter of fact, it works out pretty well in practice. In the first place, the club is crazy to get hold of good players and is only too anxious to keep them if they behave themselves and play the game. If a player gets a ten days' notice, it's usually because he deserves it. The club has to have some protection against careless or drunken or dissipated players, and the ten days' notice gives it to them.

"Take it altogether, the players get a square deal," he concluded. "They get bigger salaries than almost any of them could command in any other walk of life. They travel in Pullman cars with every luxury that the richest passenger can command. They dine and sleep in the finest hotels in the country. When they're on the road, all their expenses are paid by the club, so that their salaries are pure velvet. Nearly half the year they have to themselves, and don't have to work at all unless they want to. During their playing days they have plenty of time to study and [105] prepare themselves for some profession later on. Lots of them become lawyers or dentists or prosperous business men. Some of them go on the stage and make more in a month than the average man can make in a year. Hughson of the New Yorks opened an insurance office one winter and people fairly fell over each other to do business with him. They just wanted to tell their friends that they had done business with the great Hughson.

"Oh, we poor baseball 'slaves' are doing pretty well, thank you," Joe ended, with a laugh, as his hand tightened on the contract and the crisp blue check that had come with it.

CHAPTER XIII

[106]

OFF FOR THE TRAINING CAMP

The next few days flew by as though on wings. There were a hundred things to be done before Joe would set out on the long swing around the circuit that was to increase or diminish his fame, as fate might decree. Above all, he was anxious to spend all the time he could in practice, so as to report at the training camp in superb condition.

One thing that pleased him immensely was the success of the scheme he had carried through with Dick Talbot. True to his promise, Dick had been on hand at the appointed time with his camera and they had carried out the program he had suggested. Joe broke the white sheet of paper stretched between the bamboo poles so repeatedly and conclusively that only an idiot could have questioned that he had curved the ball. And it is only fair to state that when the film was reeled off before the astonished eyes of Professor Enoch Crabbe he admitted this fact.

"I have to admit that you are right, Mr. Matson," he avowed, "and I'm sorry that I was so [107] positive about it the other day. I shall have to study up the law that controls the curve, and by the

time you come back at the end of the season perhaps I shall have found out what it is."

"I'm sure that you can find it if anybody can, Professor," said Joe, not to be outdone in politeness; and so the two opponents parted with increased respect for each other.

"I hear the Giants are going to train at Marlin Springs this year," said Tom Davis, as they left the gymnasium and walked up the street together.

"Yes," answered Joe. "McRae seems to have a liking for Texas as a place to get in condition. And he ought to know, for he's tried almost every place on the map. He's taken his team to Birmingham, to Memphis, to Los Angeles, and one year he didn't go any farther south than Lakewood, New Jersey. So that if he's finally fixed on Marlin, he must believe that it has advantages over all the others."

"Isn't this southern training trip a rather modern idea?" asked Tom.

"Oh, no," answered Joe. "All the big teams have been doing it for a number of years now. I think it was old Cap Anson of the Chicagos who started the thing, in 1882. He took the team down south while all the other teams stayed in the north as usual. The result was that when the Chicagos came north they mowed down the other teams like grass and won the pennant that year [108] without half trying. That put a flea in the ears of the other managers, and since then it has been a regular thing. It's a mighty good thing, too, in more ways than one. It gives the manager a chance to try out all the material he has bought or drafted from the minor leagues. In the north, with so many cold and rainy days, they wouldn't get half a chance. Then, too, there are usually plenty of good teams in the vicinity of the training grounds and the boys can get plenty of practice in regular games without the weather's interfering. McRae, for instance, can find crack teams at Dallas and Waco and Houston that sometimes give the Giants all they want to do to win. The result is that when the boys come north they're in crackerjack condition. They're like so many thoroughbreds waiting for the flag to fall, and the public gets good games for its money from the very start of the season."

"Just what time do you have to report?" asked Tom.

"In just about a week," answered Joe. "I think I'll start next Thursday afternoon."

"Are you going straight to New York and go south with the rest of the team?" Tom inquired.

"I don't think so," was the reply. "McRae left it to me to pick out my route in any way that would be most convenient to me as long as I joined the party somewhere on the way. I think I'll [109] go by way of Goldsboro, North Carolina. The boys go through there, and that will be as good a place as any to meet them."

Joe spoke with an elaborate affectation of carelessness, but he could not prevent that troublesome blood of his from flooding his face.

"Gee, Joe, but you're red!" cried honest Tom. "You haven't been exercising too much this afternoon, have you?"

"Not a bit of it," returned Joe, with unnecessary emphasis. "I never felt better in my life."

But if he could fool Tom, he could not "get away with it" with Clara, and he was subjected to an unmerciful teasing when that young lady learned of the route he had chosen.

"Goldsboro, North Carolina," she mused. "Where have I heard that name before? Oh, how stupid of me! Of course, that is where Reggie lives. I suppose you're awfully anxious to see him."

But Joe was so engrossed in his packing just then that he pretended not to hear, and all her efforts to get a reply out of him, although carried out with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, ended in comparative failure.

The dreaded afternoon came at last, dreaded by all the members of the little family who were welded so closely together in heart and life. The others all went down to the train to see Joe off, [110] and it was only the presence of a large part of the population of Riverside, who had come with a similar purpose, that kept the mother and sister from breaking down entirely at the thought of the long parting from the son and brother that they idolized. As it was, they bore up bravely, and waved their handkerchiefs with smiles that were tremulous as the train moved out of the station to the accompaniment of a storm of cheers from the crowd that packed the platform. Joe waved back, but he had eyes for only three figures in all that throng. The train rounded a curve and he was off, leaving the old home town behind him for many months to come.

The train was a local and he had to travel twenty miles before he should reach the Junction, where he was to connect with the "Flyer." He found the latter train puffing impatiently when he arrived, and it was the work of a moment to transfer his belongings to the sleeper. He found the seat which his ticket called for and settled down for an unbroken trip to Goldsboro.

He was lost in the pleasant thoughts this name called up when the porter passed through announcing that dinner was ready in the dining car. Joe's healthy appetite seldom had to be prodded by a second announcement, and he promptly went forward. He found a good seat facing forward, and he was soon engrossed in a careful study of the bill of fare. It proved to be all that [111] he could ask, and he soon had a most tempting and abundant meal spread before him.

He applied himself to this conscientiously, and was half-way through the meal when a man took the seat directly opposite him. Joe gave him a passing glance and saw that he was a man rather advanced in years but who bore himself with a certain suppleness and vigor that bespoke an early athletic training. It was an honest, pleasing face he had, Joe decided, after a careless

glance. Then he went on eating and forgot all about the stranger.

But the newcomer kept looking at Joe from time to time with a puzzled expression, as though he had seen him before but scarcely knew how to place him. Several times he seemed on the point of addressing the young pitcher, but checked himself. At last the impulse proved too strong for him to resist.

"Beg pardon," he said, "but your face looks very familiar to me. Would you mind telling me your name?"

Joe looked up with quick suspicion. He had been approached more than once by oily strangers who had sought to scrape acquaintance, and he had learned to be on his guard. But there was nothing in the frank smile and candid face before him to arouse distrust, and he answered readily: [112]

"Not the least in the world. My name is Joseph Matson."

"Not the Matson that is going to play on the Giants this year?" asked the stranger eagerly.

"I guess I am," returned Joe, smiling.

"That explains why your face looked so familiar!" exclaimed the other. "I've seen your picture in various papers twenty times in the last week. I've read all about you, and I'm mighty glad to meet you. My name is Wilson, and I'm an old ball player myself. In fact, I guess I was playing professional ball twenty years or more before you were born."

"That's a long time ago," laughed Joe, as he took the stranger's offered hand and shook it heartily. "What team did you play on and what was your position?"

"I played right field on the old Red Stockings of Cincinnati," was the answer.

Joe almost jumped out of his seat.

"Not *the* Red Stockings, the team of 1869?" he cried. "Not the team that whipped them all, that went through the whole season without losing a single game?"

"That was my team," was the answer given calmly, though a gleam of pride and exultation came into the stranger's eyes as he noted Joe's enthusiasm.

CHAPTER XIV [113]

DIAMOND HEROES

Joe was all excitement and animation. He had never dreamed that he would ever be sitting face to face with one of the famous team that swept through our country like a prairie fire and made a record that has never been equaled in the history of baseball.

"This is sure my lucky day!" he cried. "I'd willingly have traveled hundreds of miles to have a look at you and hear you talk. And here you drop right down at my table! I'll have something to tell the rest of the boys that will make them green with envy. I give you fair warning that I'm going to keep you talking till bedtime or until I pump you dry."

The old-time player laughed at Joe's delight, but he would have been more or less than human if he had not been pleased by it.

"I'm afraid you make too much of it," he said, with a deprecating wave of the hand. "You young fellows have the center of the stage just now. We old boys are the has-beens. There are only four of our old team left. All the others have crossed the Great Divide." [114]

"Their memory won't die, though, as long as there is a baseball fan left in these United States," declared Joe. "Why, there's scarcely a 'fanning bee' that I've ever been in, but what the name of the famous old Red Stockings comes up in some way or other. They've left a mark upon the game that will never grow dim."

"It's good to hear you say so, anyway," said Wilson. "We thought ourselves that we were 'some pumpkins' when we started out, especially after we'd handed a few lacings to some of the other teams, but we never thought we were going to win fifty-seven games right off the reel. We used to look at each other, as one team after the other fell by the wayside, and wonder when our turn would come. It certainly seemed a miracle that we should escape with a whole skin every time. I suppose we would have gone under toward the end of the season if our reputation hadn't scared the other teams so that they were licked before they came on the field. As it was, the scores as a rule weren't even close. Our tightest squeeze was when we whipped the Mutuals of New York by four to two. But the way we treated the Buckeye team was a sin and a shame," he chuckled. "We walloped them by one hundred and three to eight."

The veteran was getting warmed up now and his eyes flashed as he recalled the glorious exploits of his young manhood. [115]

Just then the waiter came along and placed two checks on the table. Wilson reached for his, but Joe was too quick for him.

"No, you don't," he laughed, as his hand closed over both checks. "This is on me. It isn't often that one has a chance of having a Red Stocking for a guest, and I'm going to make the most of it."

“‘Youth will be served,’” quoted Wilson, with a smile, as he acquiesced good-naturedly.

“I hope you’re not traveling with anybody,” said Joe, as they rose to leave the table, “because if you’re not I hope to have your company for the rest of the evening.”

“I’m all by my lonesome,” returned his new friend, “and I’ll be only too glad to accept your invitation. To tell the truth, I was looking forward to a dull evening all by myself, as my eyes are not strong enough to do much reading at night.”

They made their way back to Joe’s reservation and settled themselves cozily for a long talk. They formed a dramatic contrast, if they had thought of it. On the one hand was a veteran, who, like Goldsmith’s soldier:

> “Shouldered his crutch to show how fields were won,”

while Joe presented a picture of eager, ambitious youth, dreaming of coming fame and standing [116]
with shining eyes on the very threshold of achievement. But though so widely separated in years, they were one in the mystic free masonry that unites all lovers of the great national game of our country.

“We didn’t use to travel in any such style as this in the old days,” remarked Wilson, as he looked around at the rich appointments of the Pullman. “As a matter of fact, we had to scratch sometimes to get money enough to carry the team from one place to another in an ordinary day coach. Those were the days when baseball was a sport, pure and simple, and nobody thought of it as a business to make money from. Usually there were no regular salaries for the players, and they simply divided up the receipts from the different games and made them go as far as they would. Many of the games were played in open fields, where everybody could come and contribute what they liked when the hat was passed for the collection. Even when there were enclosed grounds, the admission fee was twenty-five cents or less, and except on special occasions the crowds were nowhere near as large as they are to-day. But we’d rather play than eat, and we played the game for the fun we could get out of it. And fun it was, I assure you.”

“You spoke of making over a hundred runs in a single game,” remarked Joe. “There must have [117]
been some walloping of the horsehide, and I feel sorry for the fielders that had to chase the ball.”

“They certainly got plenty of exercise,” chuckled Wilson. “Of course, the batters in those days had a big advantage over the pitchers. Nobody knew anything about curving the ball until the time of Cummings and Mathews, and instead of the ball looking like a pea as it came over the plate it was more like a balloon. The ball had no friends, and everybody took a poke at it. The batter, too, could step out of the box to reach for a ball, and they took advantage of it. If they do it today, you call them out. There was no ‘waiting out’ the pitcher in order to get a base on balls. It was a point of honor to swipe the ball for all you were worth, and the public expected you to do it.

“It was mighty hard on the fielders in the old days,” he went on, “because none of them wore gloves, and as the ball was harder and livelier than it is today, broken fingers were much more common. I’ve seen some of the old boys who had had every finger on both hands broken at some time or another. I was an outfielder and got off more easily; but I’ve had two broken fingers,” and he held up his right hand for Joe to see.

“I don’t see how the catchers got along without gloves, even if the other players did,” [118]
suggested Joe.

“Well, the pitching wasn’t as swift then as it is now,” explained the veteran. “Besides, base stealing hadn’t been reduced to the science it is today, and the catchers didn’t need to get hold of the ball in such a hurry. Moreover, a third strike was out if the catcher caught it on the first bound, so that as a rule they relied on this and stood a good way behind the plate.”

“Do you think that the game has advanced very much since the old days?” asked Joe.

“Oh, immensely!” was the generous and unexpected concession. “We didn’t know anything in the old days of the ‘inside stuff’ you set such store by today. The ‘squeeze play,’ the ‘delayed steal,’ the ‘sacrifice hit’ are all modern inventions. But when it comes to fielding, there isn’t a man to-day that could show George Wright anything at shortstop or Ross Barnes at second base. And we had batters that could give points to Wagner and Cobb.”

“I suppose you wanted to ‘kill the umpire’ once in a while, just as we do now,” suggested Joe, with a grin.

“Once in a while, but not so often,” smiled the other. “Umpiring was a mighty sight easier job then than now. The umpire used to sit in an easy chair at the side of the plate and a good distance off so that there was no danger of being hit by a thrown ball or a foul tip. But he didn’t [119]
get the big salary that the men with the indicator get today. Two or three dollars at the end of a game was considered plenty, and there were lots of times when he didn’t get even that.”

“I’ll bet you’ve seen some sparkling plays in your time,” said Joe.

“You’re just right,” agreed Wilson. “I’ve seen lots of things that took the spectators clear off their feet. One of the queerest I remember was a triple play made by an outfielder. Have you ever seen one?”

“I’ve only seen one in my life,” answered Joe. “They are pretty scarce birds and often the league goes through a whole season without one being made. And when they do happen, it’s an infielder who makes it. I don’t exactly see how an outfielder could pull it off.”

“I don’t think it has ever been done but once,” returned Wilson, “and I had the luck to be playing in that game. Paul Hines, the center fielder of the Providence Club, was the player who turned the trick.

“There were men on second and third and nobody out. The man at bat lifted a short fly into center, just back of short. It seemed a dead certainty that the ball would fall safe, and the men on bases set sail for the home plate. Hines came in like a quarter horse and just managed to catch [120] the ball on a level with his shoe tops. In the meantime, the man on third had reached home and the man from second had rounded third and was scooting for the plate. Hines had had to run so far in that he was close to third, so he simply kept on running and stepped on the bag. That of course put out both men, who couldn’t get back to third in time, which, with the fly catch, made three out in all. It was a remarkable play, and it was a long time before the papers got through talking about it.”

“I don’t wonder,” Joe declared. “It was a case of dandy fielding and quick thinking.”

“But now tell me about yourself,” urged Wilson. “Here I’ve been running on, as old fellows will, and you’ve hardly said a word about yourself.”

“The case is different,” protested Joe. “You’re the fellow who has actually done things, and I’m the one who’s only hoping to do them.”

“You can’t tell me that,” came back Wilson. “Any man who has already had a season with the St. Louis Club in the National League and was so good that McRae made a grab for him, has already done things worth doing. I’ve seen your record, young man, and it’s a crackerjack. I’m looking for you to burn things up, when the season opens.”

“I only hope you’re right,” said Joe. “But it’s going to be a tough proposition. All the clubs have [121] been strengthened since last season, and there isn’t one of them that can be figured as an easy mark. Chicago and Pittsburgh especially will be strong contenders, and the club that beats them out will win the pennant. I think the Giants have the best chance, but if we do win we’ll know we’ve been in a fight.”

The talk continued with such a disregard for the passage of time that before they knew it most of the berths had been made up and all the passengers except themselves were getting ready to retire. Then Wilson rose.

“My berth is in the next sleeper,” he said, as he extended his hand, “and as I reach my station at five o’clock in the morning I won’t have a chance to see you again right away. But I’ll see you play more than once this season. I hope you’ll have the best of luck and come out ahead in the race for the pennant. And I’m more glad than I can tell that I’ve run across you. With young men like you in it, the future of the game is safe.”

Joe shook hands warmly.

“The game would have gone to smash long ago if it hadn’t been for the strong foundation laid for it by famous old teams like yours,” he asserted. “As for me, I’ll never forget as long as I live that I’ve shaken hands with one of the old Red Stockings of sixty-nine.” [122]

Joe was in high spirits after his visitor left. The chance meeting had braced him like a tonic. If he had been the least bit superstitious, he might have been inclined to look upon it as more than a coincidence.

Here he is, on his way to join the most famous team of the present. At the very start of his journey he meets a member of the most famous team of the past.

Is it an omen of coming triumph? At any rate, it is an inspiration.

That night in his sleep Joe pitched the Giants to victory!

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[123]

CHAPTER XV

A CHARMING VISION

“Only a dream,” commented Joe, as he was dressing the next morning, “and they say dreams go by contraries. Let’s hope that won’t hold true in this case. If I could only strike out Wagner on the field as easily as I did in my sleep, there’d be nothing to the race except the Giants.”

He was sorry that he could not see Wilson opposite him at breakfast as he had been at supper on the night before, but he supplemented the absence of the veteran by a newspaper which he propped up before him as he sipped his coffee. Mrs. Matson had always objected to this at home, on the ground that it was unsociable, and Joe had respected her wishes; but just now he had no one to consult except himself, and he did as he chose. Joe had a shrewd idea that all women felt the same way and resented having a rival in the newspaper. Probably Mabel herself—— But pshaw! that thought didn’t bother him. Who would want to look at an old newspaper when opposite him at the table was something so much better to look at, something that wore fetching [124] little boudoir caps and all sorts of dainty frilly things, something with brown eyes and wavy hair, something that laughed and teased and bewitched while it poured the coffee?

“Come, old man,” Joe said to himself, “this will never do. Brace up and get on the job. Help the

Giants to win the flag, get a slice of the money from the World's Series, and then you'll be in a position to ask the sweetest girl in the world whether she is willing to pour your coffee for the rest of her life."

Naturally it was the sporting page that engrossed most of his attention. A great deal of space was devoted to the departure of McRae and most of the Giants from New York on their way to the grounds at Marlin for the spring training trip. Rosy predictions were indulged in as to the result of the coming season. The general opinion seemed to be that New York had a capital chance for the pennant, now that McRae had plugged up two weak places in the team, and especially because he had strengthened his pitching staff by the addition of Matson, who had done such sterling work in the box for the Cardinals the previous season.

These predictions interested Joe, but were not especially convincing. He had seen so many "good things" go wrong, so many teams strong on paper "come a cropper," while those who were [125] only given an outside chance by the baseball scribes came up from the ruck, that he had become an habitual resident of "Missouri," and had to be "shown." Moreover, this was a New York paper, and he knew that local sheets in the seven other cities of the National League were industriously trying to prove, to their own satisfaction at least, that their favorite sons could not lose.

What did have an especial interest for him, however, was an article that told of his exploit in subduing Talham Tabbs. The news had filtered out from Riverside through the columns of the local paper, and the metropolitan sporting reporter had been quick to recognize it as having all the elements of a good story. So he had featured it for all that he was worth, even introducing an imaginary picture of the madman standing on the lumber pile while Joe was in the act of hurling the ball.

Joe was amused and rather pleased, and yet he knew that the story would win him a large amount of banter from his mates.

"They'll be joking about Matson's 'freeze' ball from now to the end of the season," he grinned. "Well, as long as it gives 'cold feet' to the batters I have to face, I won't have to worry about it."

He made a hearty breakfast and strolled back into his car, wholly at peace with himself and the [126] world. The pleasant influence of his dream still clung around him, and then, too, every mile traversed by the "Flyer" was bringing him nearer and nearer to Goldsboro.

It is not to be hastily assumed from this that Joe was unduly anxious to meet his new team-mates. There would be plenty of time to become acquainted with them before the season closed. In fact, he would probably have a surfeit of their society.

But Goldsboro was a pleasant town, and he would have four hours to stay before the train from New York bearing McRae and his men should pull into the station.

While he had been in the dining car the train had stopped at a station and several passengers had boarded it. Joe noticed as he went to his seat that the car seemed fuller than when he had left it.

He sat looking out of the windows at the flying scenery for a while, and then, as the train boy stopped at his seat, he put his hand in his pocket for some change to buy a magazine that had an unusually attractive cover.

But as he settled back to study it, his eye, roving over the car, caught sight of something vastly more attractive.

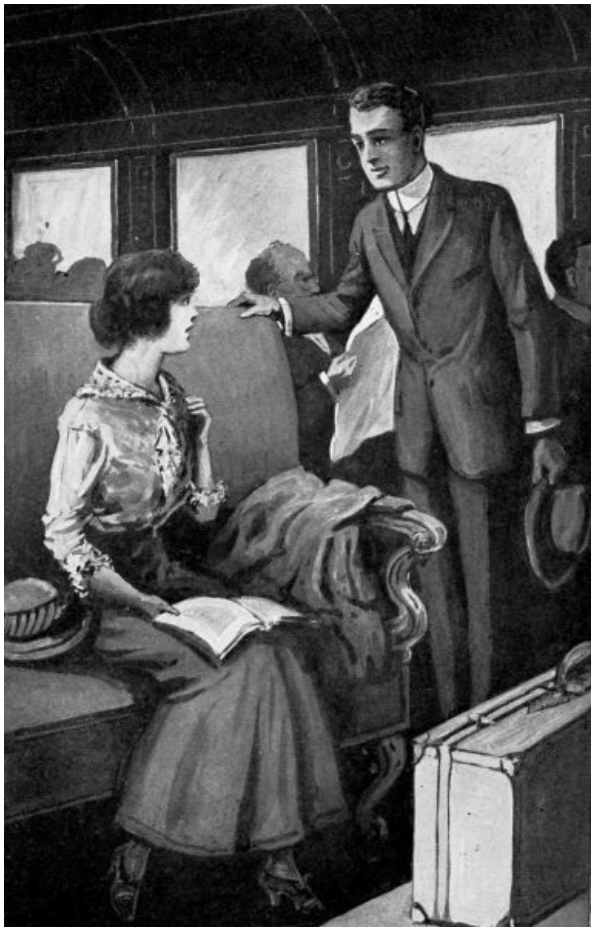
Three seats in front of him next the window sat a girl. He could not see her face, but there was [127] something in the tilt of the head that reminded him of Mabel.

He sat for a moment as if transfixed. The next instant he was standing before her, hat in hand, his eyes eloquent with pleasure at this unexpected meeting.

"Mabel!" he stammered.

She looked up and her face flooded with color.

"Joe!" she exclaimed delightedly. "How glad I am to see you!" And then as though she had been betrayed into saying more than she intended her face became still rosier. Joe decided on the spot that pink was his favorite color.



“JOE!” SHE EXCLAIMED DELIGHTEDLY. “HOW GLAD I AM TO SEE YOU!”

“What on earth brought you down this way?” she asked, as she made room for Joe to sit down beside her, a permission of which he availed himself with alacrity.

“I guess it’s because I’m the luckiest man on earth,” said Joe gallantly.

“What a pretty speech!” and she dimpled mischievously. Joe had never known that dimples could be so distracting.

“It seems to me that you are pretty far from home yourself,” he declared.

“Are you complaining on that account?” she laughed.

“Anything but that,” protested the young pitcher, and the look that accompanied the words was convincing evidence of his sincerity.

“I’ve been attending a wedding of one of my old schoolmates,” explained Mabel. “We had been [128] great chums at boarding school and nothing would do but that I should act as her bridesmaid. We had a great time, and after the happy couple had started on their honeymoon, her parents insisted that I should stay a day or two with them. I wanted to get home yesterday, but they wouldn’t have it.”

Joe mentally blessed the unknown benefactors who had prevented Mabel from taking an earlier train.

“I guess I know after all, why you are coming in this direction,” she went on. “You know I’m greatly interested in baseball and I’ve been keeping pretty well posted as to the doings of the teams. I see that Mr. Joseph Matson is no longer a member of the St. Louis nine,” she said archly.

“No,” laughed Joe. “They got tired of me and so they wished me on the New Yorks.”

“Isn’t that glorious!” declared Mabel with unaffected enthusiasm. “I’ve been wanting to have a chance to congratulate you ever since I heard the news. It’s a great step forward, and it’s wonderful when you think that you’ve only been in the league a year. But I’m not a bit surprised, after seeing some of the games you pitched last year. That last one you pitched in New York was just splendid.”

“Do you know why it was so good?” said Joe, earnestly, bending toward her. “It was because I [129] had a mascot in the grandstand that day and I simply couldn’t lose.”

“Is that so?” asked Mabel, innocently. “Dear me, how very interesting! I’ve always heard that ball players were superstitious. What kind of a mascot was it?”

“Why,” said Joe, “it had brown eyes and the most beautiful wavy hair, and a lot of dimples and ——”

“Oh, look at that funny little farmhouse,” hastily remarked Mabel, looking out of the window. “Did you ever see anything so quaint?”

But Joe, who had not the slightest interest in quaint farmhouses just at this moment, persisted:

“As I was saying, this mascot——”

“Yes,” interrupted Mabel, “but tell me one thing that I’m just dying to know. Do you think the New Yorks will win the pennant this year?”

And Joe, despite himself, was forced to bow to her will and change the subject. But he mentally resolved that he would yet tell her what he wanted to about that mascot.

“That’s something that’s pretty hard to tell,” he answered. “We’ve got a mighty strong team on paper, and if we get our share of the breaks, I don’t see anything that’s going to beat us out.”

“Won’t that be fine!” she exclaimed. “And that’ll mean that you’ll play in the World’s Series. [130]
Oh, if you could win the championship of the league and the championship of the world in the same year!”

“It’s asking a good deal,” laughed Joe, “but stranger things than that have happened. It would mean a lot of glory and it would also mean a lot of money.”

“Oh, you mercenary men!” she smiled. “Always thinking about money.”

“Sure,” said Joe. “Why shouldn’t they. What do you think they want the money for? Listen, Mabel. Shall I tell you what Clara said would be a good thing for me to do with the Series money if I get a part of it?”

But Mabel scented danger and again she fenced.

“Don’t trouble,” she said. “I’ll write to Clara and ask her about it.”

Poor Joe realized how helpless a mere man is in the hands of a pretty girl when she wants to make him speak or refrain from speaking. But he clung desperately to the theme in the hope that in some way or other it would give him an opening.

“I saw a moving picture the other day that was a dandy,” he went on. “It showed the winners of
the Series last year getting their checks in the office of the Treasurer. Were they a happy looking [131]
bunch? I should say so. One of the checks was flashed on the screen and it showed figures for three thousand eight hundred dollars odd.”

“A little fortune in its way,” agreed Mabel.

“I should say it was,” continued Joe. “Why, do you know what a man could do with that money? He could get a cozy little home and furnish it and——”

“Speaking of Reggie——” interrupted Mabel hurriedly.

“I wasn’t speaking of Reggie,” said Joe, exasperatedly. At that moment he could have wished the unoffending Reggie at the bottom of the sea.

“I know we weren’t,” said Mabel, sweetly, “but really we ought to be because I’m awfully worried about the dear boy. He’s been acting so queerly of late. Hasn’t seemed to have any appetite, and at night I can hear him walking the floor in his room. I’ve tried to get him to tell me what is troubling him, but he just says it is nothing and I can’t get any satisfaction. Then too, he’s constantly taking flying trips all over the country. He’s been away now for some time and in one of his letters he told me that he had seen you. Did he tell you what was on his mind?”

It was very hard to resist the pleading in those brown eyes, but Joe was loyal to that free
masonry that makes men hang together. And besides, the little witch had been tantalizing him so, [132]
that there was a little wicked satisfaction in having the whip hand himself, if only for a moment.

“Why, Reggie seemed very much as usual,” he declared. “If he was a bit worried, it’s only what all men feel at times. I know that more than once after I’ve lost a close game I’ve been like a bear with a sore head. He’ll be all right, no doubt, after a while. Do you think he’s at home now?”

“I rather think he is,” returned Mabel, “but I’m not sure. He wrote me that he expected to get home some day this week. But you’ll have a chance to see for yourself when we get to Goldsboro. Of course, you’ll come up to our house for dinner?”

“Do you really want me to?” he asked.

“Of course I do,” she returned. “Mother will be glad to meet you again too. She’s talked a lot about you since the last time you were there. She thinks you’re such a handsome young man,” she added mischievously, for the pleasure of seeing him blush.

“By the way,” she went on, enjoying his confusion, “I’ve seen your picture in the papers so often for this last week or two.”

“It’s a shame to spoil good paper by putting my ugly phiz upon it,” said Joe, getting redder still.

“Ugly!” exclaimed Mabel, warmly. “I think it’s just——” [133]

She checked herself as though she had gone too far, and now it was her turn to blush.

“What do they say about the great Mr. Matson in today’s papers?” she asked lightly. “I haven’t seen a copy yet. Have you got one? I’d like to see it, if you have.”

Her wish was a command and Joe went to his seat returning with the paper. She turned to the sporting page and her eye fell upon the picture of Joe in the lumber yard.

“Why, what’s this?” she asked, wonderingly.

“Oh, it’s a little thing that happened in Riverside,” answered Joe. “The newspapers got hold of it and are making a mountain out of a molehill.”

With quickening curiosity, Mabel read the account from beginning to end. When she had finished she looked up at Joe, and there was something in her eyes that Joe had longed to see there, something that made his heart give a wild leap.

"Goldsboro," shouted the brakeman, putting his head in the door. "All out for Goldsboro!"

CHAPTER XVI

[134]

THE GIANT TEAM

There was a mad scramble to gather their belongings together and by the time they were going down the aisle of the car Mabel had recovered something of her self possession.

"I'm going to steal this paper from you," she said, "and I just want to tell you that it was one of the finest things I've ever heard or read about. There isn't one man in a million that would have thought and acted so quickly and skillfully. So there now, Mr. Hero," she added in a lighter tone, to conceal her real feeling.

Joe, whose head was in a whirl and who was not quite sure whether he was in Goldsboro or Heaven or a blending of both, was about to reply when a well-known voice fell on his ears:

"Hello, Sis! Why, Joe Matson, by all that's lucky! What good wind blew you into Goldsboro? Welcome to our city."

[135]

And the next minute Reggie had grasped his hand and was shaking it as though he would wring it off.

Joe returned the greeting with equal cordiality.

"How are you, Reggie, old man!" he exclaimed. "I'm awfully glad to find you at home. I was talking to Mabel about you and she wasn't sure whether you would be here or not. I'm certainly in luck meeting two of the best friends I have on the same day."

"It was a big surprise to me," said Mabel, "when Joe seemed to rise up like a ghost out of the floor of the car."

"A pretty substantial ghost, I take it," laughed Reggie, as he took in the stalwart frame and perfect condition of his friend.

"Joe's coming up to the house for dinner," went on Mabel.

"You just bet he is," declared Reggie. "He doesn't get out of my clutches as long as he stays in Goldsboro. Hope you can make us a good visit, Joe."

"About four hours or so," laughed Joe.

"Four hours only!" Reggie stared at him blankly. "What's the answer?"

"Joe's on his way to the training camp at Marlin Springs," explained Mabel. "The Giants pass through here this afternoon and Joe is going to join them when their train comes along."

[136]

> "If so soon I'm to be done for,
> I wonder what I was begun for,"

quoted Joe, with a smile.

"It's too bad," declared Reggie with unaffected regret. "But since the minutes are so precious we'll make every one of them count. I've got my buzz wagon outside. Give me your traps and bundle in, both of you."

Joe helped Mabel into the rear seat, holding her hand perhaps a wee bit longer than necessary in doing so, and then settled down beside her, while Reggie grasped the wheel and threw in the clutch. Reggie's judgment in cars was good, however much it might go astray when it came to finance, and he was a skilled driver, so that it was not long before they had left the business part of the town behind them and were threading the more fashionable street that led to the Varley mansion.

"It's a splendid day for motoring!" exclaimed Mabel. "I wish we were going further."

"The end of the world wouldn't be too far, if you were alongside of me," affirmed Joe, trying to look into her eyes.

But because she was afraid perhaps to let him see just then what was written there, she kept them averted, though a tell-tale flood of color rioted from neck to brow.

[137]

They stopped before a large substantial house that bore every mark of solid prosperity. Reggie jumped out and threw open the door and Joe helped Mabel to alight. She ran lightly up the steps with a gay little wave of her hand.

"I suppose Reggie will want you to go with him while he puts the car into the garage," she said. "In the meantime, I'll prepare the folks inside for the great honor that has come upon them. It isn't often that we have a chance to entertain a hero."

Joe shook his finger at her menacingly, as with a laugh she entered the door that was opened

by a servant.

“I suppose Mabel was referring to that scrap you had with Talham Tabbs,” said Reggie, as he guided the car to the garage in the rear of the house.

“Yes,” replied Joe, “as luck would have it, one of the New York papers got hold of that and played it up strong. Mabel happened to get hold of it on the train and she’s given it a good deal more importance than it is worth.”

“She can’t very well do that,” protested Reggie warmly, “for it was a good piece of work, don’t you know. I’d have told her of it myself before this, only I was afraid that she might get on to that wretched muddle of mine.”

“How about that, by the way?” asked Joe, eagerly. “Tell me now while you have a chance. Have [138] you found any clue to the fellow’s whereabouts?”

“Not a thing,” replied Reggie, gloomily. “I’ve been following up tips ever since I left Riverside and I’m no nearer to him now than I was then.”

“It’s too bad,” consoled Joe. “It beats all how that fellow could have made such a getaway. It wasn’t half an hour after he had escaped before we were hot on his track. He didn’t have any hat or overcoat, and everybody was on the lookout for him. How on earth could he have managed it?”

“Search me,” said Reggie, disgustedly. “That fellow is as slick as greased lightning. He proved that by the way he got hold of my securities. All madmen are said to be cunning, but I’ll bet he could give cards and spades to the whole bunch and beat them out. I suppose there’s nothing left for me but to make a clean breast of it to the governor. As it is, I’m only sending good money after bad, running round the country as I do.”

“Don’t give up yet, old man,” cried Joe, clapping him heartily on the shoulder. “While there’s life there’s hope. The game isn’t over till the last man’s out in the ninth inning. Buck up. You may be happy yet. You can tell your father any time, but there’s no use doing it until your year is up and you have to. If there’s anything that I have learned from baseball it is never to stop trying. [139] Get up on your toes and play the game.”

“By George, old man, it’s good to hear you talk that way!” cried Reggie, with a sudden accession of hope. “I get so moody and dopey mulling the thing over to myself that I lose heart. But you’re right. I’ll pull myself together and fight the thing out to a finish.”

“That’s the real stuff,” approved Joe. “The man can’t stay hidden forever, and any day may see the end of the chase. I have a feeling that you’re going to win out. But there’s one thing I’d do, old fellow. Tell Mabel all about it. As you said yourself one time, she’s a thoroughbred. She’ll stick to you through thick and thin. She’s worrying about you now because she knows there’s something wrong with you and you won’t tell her what it is. If you talk it over with her, it will take a load off your mind and hers too. Besides, you’ll have a better chance of winning. Two heads are better than one and what one doesn’t think of the other will. She was asking me about it today. Of course, I didn’t give you away, but I made up my mind then that I would ask you to tell her the whole story. It’ll clear the air, you’ll both be happier, and your chances will be vastly better.”

“Old top, I think you’re right,” replied Reggie, who had a great respect for Joe’s judgment. “She [140] and I have always been great pals and we think the world of each other. I didn’t want to put my burden on her shoulders, but, as you say, she will worry more if she doesn’t know than if she does. I’ll tell her the whole thing before I sleep tonight.”

“That’s a go then,” said Joe, and they shook hands on it.

Reggie led the way into the house, and Joe received a most cordial greeting from Mr. and Mrs. Varley. He had met them before and they had always felt most warmly toward him since the day that he had rescued Mabel from being carried over a cliff by a runaway horse. All that they had seen and heard of him since had increased their favorable estimate of him. And Joe did all he could to deepen that impression, because some day he expected to ask these kindly people for one of their most precious possessions and he wanted the answer to be the right one.

The dinner was free from all formality, for despite their wealth, the Varley home life was as simple and unaffected as Joe’s own home at Riverside. Mrs. Varley beamed upon him and told him what she thought of his rescuing the baby, while Mr. Varley was especially interested in Joe’s contract and bonus, and his chance of getting into the World’s Series. It is more than likely that the shrewd business man already saw what way the wind was blowing and guessed pretty well [141] the nature of the question that Joe hoped some day to ask him. Reggie was gayer than he had been for a long time, now that he had determined to share his secret with his sister. And Mabel, winsome, sweet, bewitching, worked such havoc with her smiles and eyes and dimples that poor Joe was more hopelessly enslaved than ever.

Before he knew it the time had come for him to go. For just a minute he had her alone while the rest were in another part of the room. She was laughing and toying restlessly with a pair of gloves that rested on the table near which they stood.

“I want the pay for that paper you took from me this morning,” he said, assuming a stern air.

“How are you going to get it?” she bantered. “Perhaps I’m bankrupt.”

“In that case, I’ll take this glove and hold it as security,” he returned, suiting the action to the word.

She flushed adorably but made no protest, and Joe's fingers trembled as he put the absurdly little glove in his breast pocket.

Just then a warning "honk, honk!" came from Reggie's car, drawn up at the curb outside.

Joe, half in a daze, said goodby to his hosts, last of all to Mabel. There was no chance for more than a formal leave taking, but Joe's heart again became unruly, for in her eyes he had seen once more the look she had turned on him in the train. [142]

The two young men made good time to the station, which they reached five minutes before the train from the north rolled in.

"Goodby, old top," said Reggie, as he shook his hand in parting. "I'm no end glad that I've had these few hours with you, don't you know. You've made a new man of me. I feel as though I'd taken a tonic, by Jove."

"I'll send you a bill," laughed Joe, as he returned Reggie's grip. "Be good to yourself, old man, until I see you again. And don't forget that you promised to tell Mabel."

"I'm game," replied Reggie, as he stepped back into his car.

Joe passed through the station and out on the platform. It was a long train, composed mostly of Pullmans. Joe knew that the New York Club had two special cars chartered especially for their party, and he wondered which they were. He called to a porter.

"Which cars are the Giants traveling on?" he asked.

Into the eyes of the porter came a deep respect. He was a "fan" himself and he sized Joe up at once as a professional.

"Right over here, sah. This way, sah." And with a deep bow he seized Joe's bag and led the way to the first of the two cars located near the center of the train. [143]

Joe sprang up the steps and passed into the corridor of the car. A few steps further and he was in the car proper and surrounded by members of the Giant team.

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CHAPTER XVII

AWAY DOWN SOUTH

There were perhaps thirty men or thereabouts in the car. Some were playing cards, others telling stories, still others skylarking, while a few were quietly reading or looking out of the windows at the crowd gathered on the station platform. There was an utter absence of formality and restraint, and the prevailing atmosphere was one of good fellowship. Most of the men were well but quietly dressed, although a few were conspicuous by reason of loud ties and silken hose and flashing diamonds. And as Joe looked at the latter he grinned as he thought of his old friend Campbell, the third baseman of the Cardinals, with his love of gaudy raiment and neckwear that could be "heard a mile."

The light of recognition flashed in many eyes as they lighted on the newcomer, and the next instant Joe was shaking hands warmly with half a dozen who crowded around him.

"Joe Matson, as I live!" cried Hughson, the most famous pitcher in the game. "The man who made me take water last year in New York. I sure am glad to see you, Matson. Our boys are counting on you to get us into the World's Series this year." [145]

"I'll try to do my share," laughed Joe, "that is, if McRae doesn't keep me warming the bench. By the way, where is he? I suppose it's up to me to report to him right away."

"He's talking to one of the big muckamucks in the next car," chimed in Barrett, the Giant second baseman. "How are you, Matson, old man? You look as fine as silk."

"Been keeping himself in condition by knocking crazy men off lumber piles," laughed "Red" Curry, the right fielder. "Oh, we're onto your curves all right. Read all about it in this morning's paper. Was that straight goods or was it just a reporter's yarn?"

"The reporter hasn't let the story lose anything in the telling," said Joe. "I did bean the fellow, but it was an easy enough shot. But for the love of Pete, boys, don't hold it against me!"

There was a general laugh, and then Hughson pushed Joe into a seat and sat down beside him. In a few minutes they were in an animated conversation as to the prospects of the team for the coming season.

Joe could not help contrasting his present reception with that he had received when he first broke into the professional ranks. Then he was just a "busher," a "rookie," a nobody who had his reputation yet to win. The "old hands" had looked on him patronizingly or contemptuously and flocked by themselves. He had been made to feel that he was outside the pale, and some of the meaner spirits, fearing that he might supplant them later on, had done everything in their power to keep him down. Only a young fellow in his "first season" can know how utterly friendless and forlorn he is sometimes made to feel. [146]

But in baseball, as in everything else, "nothing succeeds like success." Joe had "arrived." He had stood the gaff and won his spurs by the hard ordeal of actual battle. He had faced the best

batters of the country and outguessed them. He had won his right to a place in the inner circle. And here he was on a plane of equality and talking as a friend and comrade with Hughson, the king of them all.

It was in no spirit of vainglory that Joe recalled these things. His head was not swelled in the slightest degree. He knew how precarious is baseball fame. He knew that the pitcher who one day had to doff his cap to the applause of the crowd might, the next time he appeared, be hooted from the box. But he was profoundly pleased and gratified that he had so far advanced in his profession that he had a recognized standing. He need not now fear that he would not even have [147] a chance to make good. He would have every opportunity and his success or failure would depend on himself alone.

"Yes," Hughson was saying, "I've been looking at the thing from every angle, and I don't see how any team has a license to beat us out. We're strong in every position except perhaps one. I won't say what that is but leave you to find it out for yourself. We've got rid of some trouble makers that knocked us out of the pennant last year and just now we're like some big happy family."

"How do you dope out the Chicagos?" asked Joe. "Don't you think they'll give us a harder fight than any of the other teams?"

"They may," admitted Hughson, thoughtfully. "They've got a terrific batting combination. They led the league in that respect last year. But I think some of their pitchers show signs of slowing up. I hear that Blaney had to go to Bonesetter Reese this winter for some trouble in his salary wing. He's the most dependable southpaw they have on the staff and if he goes back on them they'll be in a pretty serious pickle.

"They may have picked up some port side flinger in the draft this winter, but I haven't heard of any that are likely to set the river afire. Brennan, their manager, though, is as foxy as they make [148] them, and he may have something good under cover."

"How do you figure Pittsburgh?" asked Joe.

"Pittsburgh doesn't scare me much," was the answer. "Of course old Wagner is a team in himself. Isn't it wonderful how that old slugger keeps on year in and year out? He's about the only man in the whole league that I'm really afraid of. When he comes up to the plate with that big wagon tongue of his I always feel that he's more likely to get my number than I am to get his. But he can't do the work of a whole ball team after all, and the rest of the nine don't figure out so very strong, to my way of thinking. They're sure to be in the first division, but I think that lets them out. To tell the truth, I'm more sweet on Boston's chances than any one else's, outside of our own."

"Boston!" ejaculated Joe in surprise. "I didn't think they had a look in for the flag."

"Don't fool yourself," returned Hughson. "Believe me, that team will bear a lot of watching. They've got Rawlings for a manager and he's one of the most cagey men in the game. He can take a 'busher' and develop him into a star quicker than any man I ever saw outside of McRae. I know they say he has a team of cast-offs, but he's welding them into a winning combination. His weakest spot was the keystone bag, but he's made a deal with Chicago this winter and got Ebers, [149] the most brainy man who ever played second base. I'll bet he has the star infield of the league before the year is out."

"The Giants have good cause to remember Ebers," laughed Joe.

"You bet we have," returned Hughson, grimly. "It was his quick thinking that knocked us out of the championship the year that Burkett forgot to touch second. Oh, maybe we weren't sore that day when we saw our chance to get into the World's Series go glimmering. We lost at least fifty thousand dollars that afternoon by that one misplay. Poor Burkett himself felt so bad about it that the boys were afraid he was going to lose his mind. The gloom was so thick about the clubhouse that day that you couldn't cut it with a knife."

Just then a thick-set man of medium height came through the car and stopped at their seat.

"How are you, Matson?" he asked, pleasantly.

Joe was on his feet in an instant and his hand, outstretched in greeting, grasped that of McRae, the far-famed leader of the Giants.

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CHAPTER XVIII

IN HARNESS

Hughson got up and relinquished his seat to McRae.

"Sit down here," he said. "I've been chinning with Matson until he's black in the face and he'll be glad to get rid of me."

He grinned at Joe's laughing disclaimer and made his way up the car while McRae slipped into the vacant seat.

"There goes one of the finest men that ever stepped in shoe leather," he remarked, as his eye

followed Hughson's tall form up the aisle.

"Isn't he a prince?" said Joe, eagerly. "You don't know whether to admire him most as man or player."

"He's just about a hundred per cent. in both," agreed McRae. "He's been the mainstay of my team for the last ten years. There isn't enough money in the league to buy him from the Giants. He's the only man on the team who doesn't have to go through the regular schedule in the training camp. I let him come along just as he likes, for I know he'll be fit as a fiddle when the [151] season opens. I don't mind telling you that I consulted him as to getting you from St. Louis, and it was largely on his advice that I put through the deal."

"Even his opponents like and respect him," said Joe. "In swinging round the circuit last year I never heard any one say a word against him. They all agree that he's a credit to the game."

"Well, now, how about yourself?" asked McRae, as his keen eye swept over Joe's athletic form. "You look as though you had been taking care of yourself this winter. Some of my players are hog fat when they report in the spring, but I should judge that you wouldn't have to lose more than five pounds or so to get down to your best playing weight."

"Just about that, I guess," replied Joe. "I'm weighing about one hundred and seventy now, and I always feel most fit when I tip the scales at one hundred and sixty-five."

"Been doing anything outside the rings and dumb-bells?" McRae inquired.

"I've done just enough pitching to keep my arm supple," answered Joe. "We have a good gymnasium in our town and there have always been enough of the boys around to catch me when I felt like doing a little twirling."

"How about that bonus clause in the contract?" asked the manager, with a twinkle in his eye. [152] "Are you going to do us out of that extra thousand?"

"Am I going to get a chance to pitch thirty games?" laughed Joe.

McRae grinned.

"I can see that you've been figuring on it," he rejoined. "It's too early in the season to make any promises. A good deal will depend upon how my veterans come along. But I don't mind telling you that I'm going to figure you as one of my first-string pitchers and give you your regular turn in the box. The rest will depend on you. I play no favorites. I'm out to win from the first crack of the bat, and it's the man who wins his games that makes a hit with me. Whether you've been ten years in the league or one doesn't cut any ice.

"I don't need to ask you whether you drink or not," he added. "I found out all about that before I put through the deal. Besides, I can tell from looking at you that you're no booze fighter. I won't stand for dissipation on my team. I'm pretty lucky this year as far as that goes. A couple of the boys are a little wobbly in the matter of the wet goods, but I think I can make them walk the chalk line until the playing season is over. If they don't, I'll trade or sell them. But the rest of the men don't give me any trouble in that way."

"You won't have to worry about me on that score," Joe assured him. "If I fall down, it will only [153] be because I haven't it in me to win, it won't be because I've been wrestling with the demon Rum."

"That's good," laughed McRae. "Stick to that and I'll bet you win your bonus. I'm going to send over one of my rookies to talk to you. I think he has the stuff in him to make a good pitcher and I want you to help and encourage him all you can. He played last year on the Princeton team and made such a good showing that one of our scouts recommended that we give him a trial. But he's only an amateur and of course he's got an awful lot to learn. Boost him along all you can.

"By the way," said McRae, as he rose to leave, "I want to congratulate you on the job you did with that crazy man. It was a nifty bit of work."

"That thing keeps chasing me everywhere," laughed Joe. "I can't get away from it."

"It'll make good advertising," laughed McRae. "There'll be a big crowd out when you pitch your first game to see the man who can throw a snowball as well as he can a baseball. But what tickled me when I read about it was the quick thinking it showed. That's what I want on my team. I want a player to be quick in the head as well as in the feet. I haven't any use for ivory domes."

It was the first time that Joe had ever had a chance to have a real talk with the famous [154] manager. They had known each other, of course, by sight, and had exchanged occasional nods when they met. And, as Joe had whimsically told his folks, there had been an interchange of chaff in the heat of battle. But now for the first time Joe had a chance to judge of the man on whom his fate would so largely depend during the coming season, and his impression had been a favorable one.

He was familiar with McRae's record as a player before he had become a manager. He was an intensely aggressive man. Aggressiveness stood out all over him like "the quills on the fretful porcupine." On the field he was scrappy and fearless and fought like a tiger for every bit of advantage that might help his team to win. He was a terror to umpires and had probably been ordered off the field more times than any manager in the league.

But though he carried his zeal too far at times, and had made many enemies, he had many good qualities that offset his defects. He was generous and fair to his men and protected them against public clamor, when they had incurred the rage of the fickle fans. He kept Burkett, after that

ghastly error at second that had lost a championship. Twice he had lost the World's Series, owing to a muff by the center fielder at the crucial point in the game. But he knew that the man had [155] tried to do his best and he had refused to release him. He was a hard man but he tried to be a just one, and Joe felt sure that he would have every chance to make good under his management.

A tall young fellow came down the car and paused beside the seat.

"Mr. Matson?" he asked.

Joe nodded pleasantly.

"My name is Barclay," went on the newcomer. "Mr. McRae suggested that I come over and have a talk with you."

"Oh, yes," said Joe, as he rose and grasped his hand. "You're from Princeton, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Barclay. "And you're from Yale, I understand."

"That's right," replied Joe. "How's the tiger?"

"Fine," returned Barclay. "How's the bulldog?"

They laughed and sat down together. The ice was broken and they were soon talking like old friends. The traditional rivalries of their two colleges gave them an endless number of things to talk about. Joe found him very congenial and intelligent, and Barclay on his part was delighted to find himself on a friendly footing with a college man, who had broken into the big league and "made good." He had been feeling rather shaky and forlorn, as is the usual custom of "rookies," [156] and Joe, remembering his own experience, did his best to help him shake off that feeling. So chummy did they become that Joe proposed that they room together during their stay in the training camp. Barclay jumped eagerly at the chance and on a word to the manager the matter was so arranged.

In due time the train rolled into Marlin Springs and the pilgrims disembarked, glad to stretch their legs after the long journey. A big crowd of citizens and officials of the town were on hand to give them a boisterous greeting, and the village band struck up a triumphal march as the band of athletes moved on to the hotel. They made a splendid picture of physical manhood. After the long winter they were eager for the fray. They were like so many greyhounds straining at the leash.

"Look pretty good, don't they?" remarked McRae to Hughson. "But it isn't a circumstance to the way they'll look when I get through with their training and have them ready to take the field."

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CHAPTER XIX

DRIVING THEM HARD

The next morning dawned soft and balmy. The air was full of the fragrance of flowers and musical with the singing of birds. To Joe who two days before had been in a region of snow and ice where winter still reigned supreme, it almost seemed as though he had been carried by the carpet of Solomon to some different clime and country.

"Great Scott, but this is regular baseball weather!" he cried, as he looked out of the window. "Get a move on, Jim, and let's get outdoors as soon as possible. It's a crime to waste any minute of a morning like this."

Barclay, thus adjured, scrambled out of bed and they hurried into their clothes.

"What time was it that McRae wanted us to be ready to start for the park this morning?" asked Jim.

"Nine o'clock sharp, and it's after seven now. We won't have more than time to get our breakfast and get into our baseball togs."

They went down to the dining room where a special section had been reserved for the team. [158] Quite a number were already eating the excellent breakfast and others soon straggled in until all were accounted for. There was a general air of hilarity, especially among the older members of the team. The rookies, however, were on edge with nervousness in anticipation of the coming ordeal that meant so much to them. They gulped down their meal in a preoccupied way and conversation lagged in their corner.

By nine o'clock all had changed into their uniforms and had assembled in front of the hotel.

"Where's the bus?" asked one of the drafted men.

There was a roar of laughter from the old timers.

"The only bus you'll have will be those two legs of yours," chuckled Curry. "You'll start right in now, my bucko, to learn what they were made for."

The abashed rookie subsided, and just then McRae put in his appearance.

"All here, eh?" he remarked, as his keen eye ran over the group. "Come along then and we'll jog down to the Park."

The "jog" proved to be a run of two miles or more. It did not inconvenience Joe to any extent

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because he was already in fine fettle, but many of the others were winded by the time they reached the gates. But pride kept them from falling behind and none of them cared to take a chance with the rasping tongue of McRae. Besides he was only asking them to do what he was willing to do himself and they soon learned that he worked just as hard to get into condition as any “busher” on the team.

Joe tingled clear to the finger tips as he passed through the entrance and his eye fell on the diamond. For months he had been hungry for baseball. The passion for the game was in his blood, as it has to be if one is going to be a star player. He longed for the music of bat meeting ball. He felt like a colt let out to pasture in the spring.

“Go easy now, boys,” warned McRae. “Don’t get up too much steam all at once. You pitchers, especially, cut out all curves for the first few days. Just straight ones and not too fast at that. You don’t want to do anything more now than just limber up.”

There were a number of bats and balls in the little clubhouse and these were brought quickly into service. The majority of the men scattered out into the field, while others, standing near the plate, batted up flies. Others took the infield positions and passed the ball around the bases. The pitchers paired off with the catchers and tossed up a few easy ones, seldom cutting loose a fast [160] one except at times when the temptation became too hard to resist. McRae wandered around the field watching the action of the different players, putting in a word of criticism or advice here and there, but devoting himself especially to the new men from whom he hoped to cull a certain amount of “big league timber.” No one knew better than he how hard this was to get. He had thirty or more prospects on hand to develop, but if he really got two or three first-class men out of that number he would feel amply repaid for all the trouble and expense.

At noon they ran back to the hotel for dinner and returned for a two-hour session in the afternoon. They felt pretty tired when night came and they slept like logs. The next morning all were lame and sore and there were demands for arnica and a massage. But McRae believed that one is cured by “the hair of the dog that bites him,” and he insisted on the two sessions just the same although he limited the time for each. By the end of a week most of the soreness had disappeared and the men were as spry as kittens.

“Now,” McRae announced one morning, “we’re going to have some real practice. I’m going to split the squad into two teams. One will be called the Giants and the other the Yannigans. We’ll only play six inning games at the start, but I want them to be for blood. Most of the regulars will [161] be on the Giant team, but I give you old timers fair warning that if any of the Yannigans play better ball than you do they’ll get your job.”

To equalize matters somewhat, he let the Yannigans have one of the first string pitchers, but for the rest they had to stand or fall on their merits. And the Yannigans soon proved that they were not to be despised. They wanted to show McRae what they could do, and they “worked their heads off” to defeat their rivals. More than once they had that satisfaction, although in the majority of games, as was to be expected, they came off second best.

The pitching staff too was now sent through its paces. Robson, the famous old time catcher of the Orioles and a warm friend of McRae’s, had special charge of this work. For developing young pitchers he had no equal in the country.

He had a tip from McRae to pay especial attention to young Barclay, of whom the manager had great hopes. Jim had a good fast ball and a fair variety of curves. But during his last year at Princeton he had been coached by one of the greatest spit ball pitchers in the country and had developed a very effective form of that puzzling delivery.

Neither McRae nor Robson favored the “moist” ball overmuch, as they thought it took too much out of the twirler and put too big a strain on his pitching arm. Chesebro, who discovered it and [162] Ed Walsh of the Chicagos who perfected it, had both been worn out before their time. Still, as no other pitcher on the Giants used it and Barclay was willing to take the chance, they were not averse to letting him show what he could do. And Robson soon had to admit that what he could do was “plenty.” Before long, it had become clear that, whoever might be sent back to the bushes, Jim would not be among them.

As for Joe himself, he had never been in finer shape at the beginning of a season. He had “speed to burn.” The ball shot over the plate, like a bullet from a gun. His control was nearly perfect. He made the ball fairly “talk.” He won a game from the strong Houston team with comparative ease and saved another from Waco after Markwith had been batted out of the box.

“You’re playing like a house afire, Joe,” said Jim, after this last game. “I’ll bet you’ve got a rabbit’s foot concealed about you somewhere.”

“Rabbit’s foot be hanged,” laughed Joe. “I know a trick worth two of that.”

Could Joe have referred to a dainty little glove that nestled in his pocket?

In what estimation Joe was held by the “powers that be” may be inferred from a scrap of conversation that passed between McRae and Robson as the team was working its way north, [163] after training days were over, to open the season at the Polo Grounds.

“What do you think of Matson, Robbie, old boy?” asked McRae.

“What do I think?” said Robson, emphatically. “I think he’s going to be a second Hughson.”

CHAPTER XX

A TEST OF NERVE

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"How are you feeling, Joe?" asked Jim, as the men were dressing in the clubhouse, preparatory to going on the field for the first game of the championship race.

"Like a fighting cock," answered Joe. "How are you?"

"A bit shaky," confessed Jim. "My heart keeps coming up in my throat and I have to keep swallowing it all the time."

"You've got nothing to worry about," chaffed Joe. "Neither you nor I will have anything to do today but root for the rest of the boys. That's a moral certainty."

"You can't sometimes most always tell," quoted Jim. "Nothing is certain in baseball."

"No," admitted Joe, as he adjusted his belt. "But it's a cinch that Hughson will pitch today. He always does in the first game. An opening day without Hughson in the box would be like the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out."

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"Gee!" interrupted Larry Barrett as he glanced through the door in the direction of the stands. "Take a squint at that crowd! I'll bet all New York is here today."

It was the great day of the season, the day to which the hungry baseball enthusiasts in the metropolis had looked forward all through the winter and early spring. For days the fans had been in an ever increasing fever of excitement. The papers had been full of predictions as to the chances of the New Yorks for the flag. There had been pictures of the team individually and in groups together with their fielding and batting averages. There had been rosy stories of the way they had been "breaking fences" in the training camp, and there were hints that McRae had uncovered one or two "phenoms" who would make the rooters sit up and take notice. The whole population of the city that had a drop of red blood in its veins was on tiptoe with expectation.

The day had dawned clear and bright, and for hours before the time for the game to start the trains and trolleys had been disgorging their crowds at the gates. The far famed Polo Grounds had never been in more superb condition. The diamond was like so much soft green velvet. The white markings of the base lines were dazzling by way of contrast with the green. Boxes, grandstands and bleachers were filled to overflowing with a hilarious, good-natured crowd, that

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was out for a good time and determined to have it. Long before the time for starting the game, it became evident that "ground rules" would have to be established, making a hit into the crowd only good for two bases, no matter how far it went.

The Boston "Braves" were to cross bats with the Giants, and there was a keen curiosity in the crowd to see how "Rawling's cast-offs" would shape up, although few gave them more than an outside chance to win.

"Line up now, boys, for the grand march," sang out Robson, as he bustled into the clubhouse.

The team came out and got into line, McRae and Hughson leading. The Bostons joined them and the two teams came down to the plate amid an uproar of boisterous applause. The leaders clasped hands at the plate, the movie men, who were there in droves, set their machines going, and then the members of the two teams broke ranks and scattered for preliminary practice. This was snappy and lightning fast, and "stunts" were pulled off by both teams that brought the crowds to their feet.

Then the bell rang for the game to begin. The mayor of the city threw out the first ball. Hughson caught it and returned it to the mayor's wife to keep as a souvenir, after first writing his

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autograph on it at her request. Then he took his place in the box, the first Boston batter came to the plate, the umpire cried "Play ball!" and the championship race was on in earnest.

Joe and Jim had warmed up together with the other pitchers and now sat on the bench together with the rest of the New York team who were not actually playing in the game.

"Watch that drop. Wasn't it a beauty?" commented Joe enthusiastically, as the first ball eluded the batter's savage swing and fell with a thud into the catcher's glove.

"It was a lulu, all right," agreed Jim. "If that's a sample of what the old boy has in stock today, they'll break their backs going after them."

The first man proved an easy victim by the "strike out route," the second dribbled a slow roller to the box that Hughson got to first in plenty of time, and the third succumbed to a high foul that Mylert, the catcher, gathered in close to the right of first base. It was a quick inning and Hughson was greeted with cheers as he walked in.

"That's the way, Hughie, old boy!"

"You've got them buffaloed!"

"They're dead ones already!"

"They can't touch you!"

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But the Boston pitcher soon showed that he was also in fine fettle, and though the New Yorks got a man to first on a fumble by the third baseman, he got no further and the inning ended as a scoreless tie.

For three more innings the same state of things persisted, although the Giants gathered three hits while only one had been made off Hughson.

“We’re getting on to him though,” said Barrett, as he came back to the bench, referring to Leonard, the Boston pitcher. “He’s got a high, fast one that he winds around your neck, but his curves aren’t such a much. About the sixth inning we’ll start in to plug him.”

But the “Braves” had views of their own on “plugging,” and by one of the “breaks” of the game they were the first to score.

It was in the first part of the fifth inning. Willis, their first man up, had got to first through an infield hit that took a high bound just as Barrett had set himself for it and went over his head. The next player lay down a perfect sacrifice bunt which Denton, the Giant third baseman, got in time to put his man out at first though he could not prevent Willis reaching second. Hughson put on steam and struck out the next batter on three pitched balls, and the crowd breathed more easily. But the glorious uncertainty that makes the game what it is was shown when the Boston right fielder sent a beauty to left just inside the third base line that scored Willis although the batter by quick fielding was held at first. [169]

The Boston rooters went wild while the New Yorkers sat glum and silent. Their opponents had scored “first blood” and in as close a game as that one promised to be that lone run loomed up like a mountain.

“Never mind, old man,” said McRae to Hughson, as the latter walked in after the third man had been caught stealing. “The game’s young yet. We’ll see that run and go them one better.”

But the seventh inning came with the Bostons still in the lead.

“The lucky seventh,” was the cry that went through the stands. “All stretch!” And the fans went through the time-honored exercise while they whooped it up for their favorites.

“Now Larry!” they yelled as Barrett strode up to the plate, “hit it a mile! Show them where you live!”

Larry, who had led the National League in hitting the previous year, tapped both heels for luck, squared himself and glared fiercely at the pitcher.

That individual glared back and sent the ball hurtling over the plate. It chanced to be a low, fast one, the kind that Larry doted on. He caught it square on the end of his bat. It went screaming out over the center fielder’s head. On a clear field it would have been an easy home run, but in accordance with the ground rules it only counted for a two bagger. Larry perched on second with a broad grin on his face while the stands went crazy. [170]

“We’ve got him now!” cried McRae. “He’s going up in the air.”

The next batter put up a high fly to right, which was caught after a hard run, Barrett making third on the out.

The next man up was Red Curry. He looked so formidable as he swung his bat that the pitcher thought it advisable to pass him to first on four wide ones.

“He’s getting rattled!” yelled McRae. “We’ve got his goat!”

But the soundness of the pitcher’s judgment was vindicated a moment later when the next batter, Lewis, hit into a force play, so skilfully managed that while a man was out at second Larry was held at third. The crowd groaned as they saw the vision of a run go glimmering, but roared with delight a moment later when Becker scorched a hot one between second and third, bringing in Larry with the tying run. And their joy became delirium when Byrnes cracked a beauty to right and Lewis got home by a great slide to the plate.

The Giant players threw their caps in the air and Joe and Jim hugged each other in their glee. [171]

“We’re in the lead now,” chortled Joe, “and we can trust old Hughson to hold them down.”

The Boston pitcher pulled himself together and made the next batter put up a high foul that was caught by the first baseman, making the third out. But nobody cared. The Giants were ahead and there were only two innings to go.

In the Boston half of the eighth, the first man went out on a fly to center and the second “fanned.” The third hit a teasing bounder to the left of the box. Hughson made a great try, but in doing so he wrenched his knee badly. He got his man at first but when he came in to the bench he was limping and was evidently in great pain. McRae, Robson and the trainer gathered round him and massaged the knee vigorously.

“Do you think you can stay it out, Hughson?” asked McRae with great anxiety. “There’s only one more inning you know.”

“I’ll try to,” was the answer. “But in the meantime you’d better warm up another pitcher.”

McRae and Robson had a hurried conference.

“I’d put in Markwith,” said McRae, “but these Bostons are death on southpaws.”

“Try Matson,” suggested Robson. “I noticed he was going great guns in practice.”

“It’s a big risk before this crowd for his first time out,” said McRae, dubiously. “But we’ll have to chance it.” [172]

He hurried over to Joe.

“Get out and warm up, Matson,” he said, briefly. “I may have to put you in for the ninth.”

Joe’s head whirled. To follow the great Hughson! And before this record-breaking crowd!

Then he took a grip on himself.

“All right,” he answered, and taking Weldon, one of the Giant reserve catchers, he went off toward the further end of the stand and began warming up.

But the inning was very short, as the Boston pitcher was on his mettle and retired the side in one-two-three order. Long before Joe had really warmed up, the New Yorks took the field.

Hughson went out gamely to the box, trying to hide his limp as much as possible. But the Boston players recognized that this was their chance. One run would tie and two would win. It was now or never, and their heavy batters were coming up.

Hughson, with all his pluck, could not perform miracles. He tried to put all his skill and cunning into his pitching, but his wounded knee refused to back him up. There were men on first and second, with none out, when he signaled to McRae.

“It’s no use, Mac,” he said, as the latter came over to him. “I can’t bear my weight on my foot so as to get any power behind the ball. We’ve still got a chance if you put in Matson.” [173]

So Joe, at a signal from the manager, took up the pitcher’s burden with two men on bases and none out, while the Boston coachers danced up and down on the coaching lines, yelling like mad men and doing all they could to rattle him.

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CHAPTER XXI

MAKING GOOD

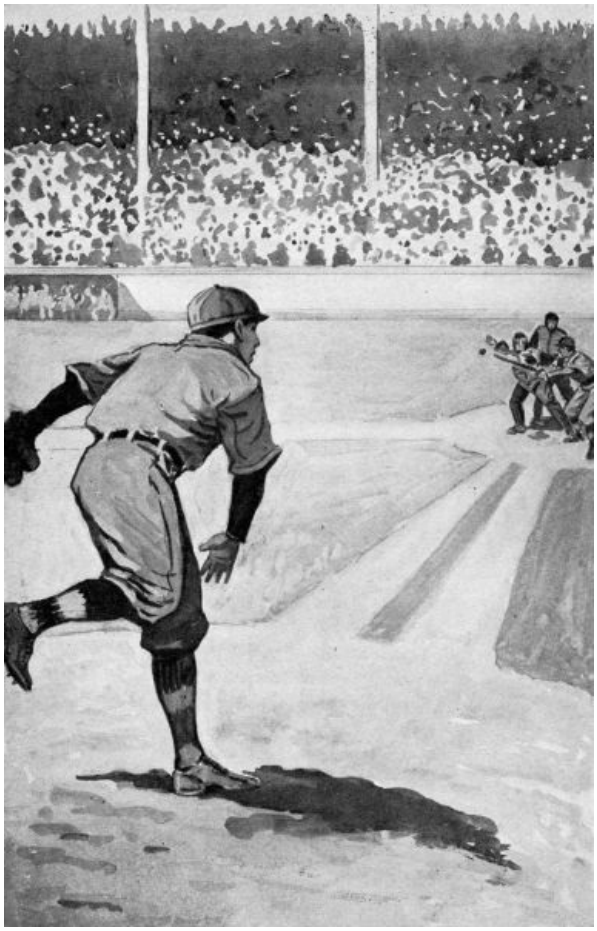
“Ladies and gentlemen!” roared the umpire, taking off his cap, “Matson now pitching for the New Yorks!”

There was a yell of applause from the packed stands to greet the newcomer. There had been a great deal of curiosity stirred up by the newspaper accounts of Joe’s exploit with the madman, and the crowd was in a friendly mood. Besides, they realized that they ought to encourage him at this critical time when the game hung in the balance. So they cheered him loyally, though not many thought he could win with such a handicap.

Some of them remembered, however, how this same young pitcher had tamed their own Giants the last game of the previous season and realized that there was still a fighting chance.

Succeeding the first wild yell, a deathlike silence settled over the stands as Joe wound up for the first ball.

Straight as an arrow it darted toward the plate, breaking into a wide outcurve as the batter lunged at it. [175]



IT DARTED TOWARD THE PLATE, BREAKING INTO A WIDE OUTCURVE.

“Strike one!” called the umpire, and a cheer went up.

The next two were balls at which the batter declined to “bite.”

“Strike two!” called the umpire as the next one cut the plate.

The next was a ball.

“He’s in the hole now!” yelled the Boston coachers. “He can’t get it over. He’s going up.”

Joe did his best to get the next one over the rubber, but he had not warmed up enough yet to get perfect control, and the umpire waved the batter down to first. He ran down, laughing derisively, while his comrades moved up to second and third.

“All over now but the shouting,” was the cry that went up from the enemy’s coaching lines. “We don’t need to hit the ball. Just leave him alone and he’ll win the game for us.”

Larry came in from second, ostensibly to consult with Joe, but really to give him a moment’s breathing space.

“Keep your nerve, old man,” he counseled. “We’ll get them yet. We’re all with you.”

“I know it, Larry,” said Joe, gratefully.

“Play ball!” yelled the Bostons.

“Write him a letter!”

“Hire a hall!” [176]

But Larry was too old a bird to mind their jeers and he took his time in getting back to his position.

Joe knew that the next batsman, depending upon his being wild, would not attempt to strike at the first balls served but would try to “wait him out.” So he put two perfect strikes across the plate. The batter grew serious and set himself for the next which he figured would also be a strike. But Joe outguessed him and fed him a slow one that he frantically struck at before it reached the plate.

“You’re out!” called the umpire, and the stands broke into thunderous applause.

Still, there were three on bases and a long fly to the outfield, even if caught, would probably bring the man in from third with the tying run. At all costs Joe must keep the ball on the ground within the limits of the infield where a play could be made for the plate.

He measured the next Boston man carefully as he came to the plate. He was the heaviest batter on the team, and his mates begged him vociferously to “line it out.”

“It only takes one to do it.”

“Give it a ride!”

“Hit it on the seam!”

The batter shook his bat at Joe.

“Put it over if you know how,” he jibed, “and I’ll kill it.” [177]

He was a trifle less confident, however, when a speedy one cut the plate breast high, missing his bat by six inches.

“That’s no way to kill a ball,” taunted Joe.

The batter was trying to think up a retort, when Joe, without waiting to wind up, slipped one over before he was expecting it.

“Strike two!” called the umpire.

“Clever work, Matson!” called out McRae delightedly, while a tempest of cheering swept the stands.

The next one was a low outcurve that the batter reached for and connected with. It shot like a bullet straight at Joe, but above his head. If his team had had a big lead, Joe would have dodged and left it to his fielders, for it was almost deadly to face it at that distance. But he leaped high in the air and it stuck in his glove. All the men on bases, thinking it was a sure hit, were legging it for home. Like a flash Joe turned and shot it down to third, completing a beautiful double play.

Three men were out, the game was over and the Giants had won by a score of two to one!

The lightning like quickness of the play had dumbfounded spectators and players alike. Only for an instant, however. Then a roar went up that could have been heard for a mile, and the crowd [178] swept down from the stands. Joe saw them coming and made a break for the clubhouse. He got away from the grandstands but the bleachers intercepted him, and for the last twenty yards he had to force his way through a surging mob who tried to grab his hand or clap him on the shoulder or in a hundred ways tried to express their appreciation of his work. It was with a sigh of relief that he found himself at last within the welcome shelter of the club’s quarters.

His comrades were not far behind him and came tumbling in pell-mell, filled with delight at having the game snatched from the fire at the last moment.

“Gee!” said Larry. “That was a close call! I never saw a prettier double!”

“You’re some pitcher, Joe!” cried Red Curry. “I thought we were goners sure with those three men on the bags.”

McRae and Robson hurried in, their features one broad grin.

“You saved the day, Matson!” exclaimed the former. “I admit I was a little scared when you went in with such odds against you. But you stood the gaff all right.”

“We’ve got the jump on the other fellows by copping the first game,” said Robson. “It’s a great thing to get away to a running start. It puts heart and courage into the team, and that certainly [179] would have been a hard game to lose.”

“It was Hughson’s game after all,” protested Joe. “It was his magnificent pitching that held them down to one run up to the ninth. All I had to do was to hold them there.”

“Of course we know what Hughson is,” said McRae, “but we weren’t quite so sure what you would be when brought face to face with a pinch. All I ask you to do is to keep up the way you’ve started.”

Joe would not have been human if he had not felt jubilant at these words of praise from the head of the team. But it did not make him lose his head. He knew that the same tongue that gave him credit now would be quite as ready to “skin him alive” if he failed to do his best. If “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” Joe knew that it was also the price of success in his chosen profession. No baseball player can rely on the great things he did yesterday. He must be prepared to do them today and tomorrow also. The same public that today had overwhelmed him with applause might in a few days be demanding that he be taken out of the box. And knowing this, Joe resolved that he would never give less than the very best that was in him. He would have his bad days—every pitcher has—but it would never be from lack of trying.

But whatever the future might have in store for him, today at least was his. The honey of [180] success was on his tongue and it was very sweet. He had made good in his first game in the metropolis. In the words of Robson, he had “got off to a running start.”

He whistled blithely as after his shower and rubdown, he got into his clothes and, accompanied by Jim, passed out into the street.

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CHAPTER XXII

A HOT CAMPAIGN

“Well, Joe, the Giants trimmed the Braves good and proper,” chuckled Jim, for the twentieth time referring to the thing that loomed largest in the minds of both.

“We certainly did, but we must remember that ‘one swallow doesn’t make a summer!’”

answered Joe. “We’ll have our own scalps taken many a time before the season’s over. As it was, we had a mighty close call. Those ‘cast-offs,’ as they call them, played like champions, and perhaps Hughson was right when he said that they were the ones we would have to look out for.”

“Perhaps so,” assented Jim. “But I’m rather sweet on Chicago for the runner-up. I see by the bulletin board that they whipped Cincinnati by twelve to three. Those fellows are terrors with the stick. You’ll have to do your prettiest when you stack up against them, Joe.”

“None of the teams are going to be easy meat,” was the answer. “They’re better balanced than they’ve been for several years. There isn’t one of them that can’t be figured to have a chance.” [182]

“That’s the way I like to see them,” declared Jim. “There’s no fun in having one or two teams out in the lead so far that there’s no chance of the others catching up.”

“I wonder whether that trouble with his knee is going to lay Hughson up,” remarked Joe, after they had taken their seats in the elevated train and were being whirled to their hotel downtown. “It would be a pretty serious thing for the nine if he were out of the running. He’s the backbone of the team.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be anything serious,” said Jim. “I overheard Farley, the trainer, telling McRae that Hughson would be as well as ever in a week.”

“I suppose Markwith will go in tomorrow,” remarked Joe.

“Quite likely,” assented Jim. “Although those Bostons just eat up left-handed pitching. I shouldn’t wonder if McRae would put you in again. You only pitched one inning and I don’t suppose that has tired you much.”

“Not a bit,” replied Joe. “Still, I think that Bugs Hartley is more likely to be called on. He warmed up well in practice before the game and seems to be in prime condition. Besides, he might feel slighted if McRae doesn’t start him. He seemed sore when I was called on today.”

“Did you notice that, too?” asked Jim. “I thought he acted mighty queer in the clubhouse this afternoon. All of the other fellows were tickled to death that we won, but Hartley seemed to have a grouch on. You don’t suppose he’s small enough to grudge you your victory, do you?” [183]

“I should hope not,” answered Joe. “I don’t see why he should. I’ve gone out of my way to be pleasant to him. He’s an odd fellow, but he’s a mighty good pitcher, and I wish him all the luck in the world.”

“Bugs” Hartley, as he had been dubbed on account of his erratic ways, had been on the Giant team for two seasons. As long as he took care of himself, he ranked among the best pitchers of the league. But he had a weakness for liquor and other forms of dissipation, and McRae had been sorely tried in his attempts to keep him within the bounds of discipline. Several times Hartley had left the team in the lurch by going off on sprees just when they most needed his services. But he had pleaded so eagerly for another chance, when threatened with dismissal, that McRae, though with many misgivings, had kept him on his staff in the hope that he might ultimately reform him.

He had an intensely jealous nature and had been much disgruntled when the deal had been put through that had brought Joe to the Giants. He figured that now McRae would feel so strong in the box that he would be more ready to dispense with his own services the next time he should kick over the traces. And the triumph of the newcomer that afternoon of the first game had been gall and wormwood to Hartley. [184]

“I wonder when I’m going to get my chance or whether I’m going to get any chance at all,” mused Jim.

“You’ll get your chance in good time all right,” declared Joe, confidently. “You’re a fixture on the team. Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m not a bit sure of that,” said Jim, dubiously. “McRae hasn’t told me so yet, and perhaps my head will fall into the basket when the time comes for him to reduce the team to the twenty-two man limit.”

“I’ve had a straight tip from Hughson that McRae means to keep you,” said Joe. “So make your mind easy on that score. As for your chance to play, you’ll have to be patient. You may have to sit on the bench for a while, but then again you may be in harness in a month. The only thing to do is to go ahead with your practice for all that you’re worth and saw wood.”

The campaign that opened that day at the Polo Grounds proved to be a hot one. During the first three weeks the Eastern clubs played among themselves, and the Western clubs did the same. Following the Braves at the Polo Grounds came the Phillies and the Brooklyn Superbas, and then the Giants in their turn visited the grounds of their opponents. The games were bitterly contested, for this year the Eastern teams were scheduled to go West before the Westerners invaded the East, and each was eager to start on the trip with a substantial lead already gained. It was nip and tuck, with now one team, now another at the head of the column, but the net result was that when the teams took the train for the West the Giants were in the lead by a narrow margin of only half a game over the Phillies, while the other two were bunched close up. [185]

“I’m glad anyway that we make the first trip West instead of it being the other way,” remarked Joe to Jim, as they dropped into their seats in the Pullman that was to take them to St. Louis, where they were to open. “We’ll have the big advantage of winding up the season on our own grounds, and in a close race such as this promises to be, that may make all the difference in the world.”

“Right you are,” answered Jim. “And here’s hoping that our last game at the Polo Grounds may end like the first—in victory.”

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CHAPTER XXIII

AN EVIL INFLUENCE

It was with a thrill that Joe gathered up his hand-baggage when the train rolled into the Union Station at St. Louis. Here was the city where he had first broken into the big league, where he had fought his first battles and won his spurs in fast company. If he had not played on the Cardinals, he might not have attracted the attention of McRae and been traded to the Giants; if he had not been on the Giants he would not have had his present chance of getting into the World’s Series; if he should get into that dreamed of Series there would be that neat little sum with which to start housekeeping—and here Joe put his hand into his breast pocket to touch that little glove.

His pleasant musings were interrupted by a vigorous clap on the shoulder and the sound of a well-remembered voice.

“Hello, Joe, old man!” it said, and the next instant Joe was shaking hands with good old Rad Chase, who had come down to meet him.

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“Rad, old boy, there’s no man on earth I’d rather meet,” he declared, after introducing him to Jim. “How are things going in little old St. Louis?”

“Fine as silk,” grinned Rad. “The only thing we’re missing is the eminent Mr. Matson on our team. If we had him, we’d make a mighty strong bid for the flag. I see that you’ve been up to your old tricks in New York. They’re beginning to put your name and Hughson’s together when they talk of the Giants’ chances to win the pennant.”

“You mustn’t believe all you hear,” laughed Joe. “But I’m glad to see that you’re cleaning up things here in the West. Those three straight from Chicago last week was some ball playing.”

“Let’s hope it isn’t only a spurt,” said Rad. “We need some Giant scalps in our wigwam just now. About three out of four will do.”

“Guess again,” laughed Joe. “But tell me how are the old boys? How is Campbell? Has he got any new neckties this year?”

“Has he?” grinned Rad. “He showed me one yesterday that had a regular delirium-tremens effect. I’m afraid to go to sleep for fear I’ll dream of it.”

“Come up to the hotel with us and have dinner,” invited Joe, as he signaled for a taxi.

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“You bet I will,” replied Rad, heartily. “I’ve got a hundred things I want to talk to you about and now that I’ve got my hooks on you, I’m not going to let go in a hurry.”

They had a royal meal and a delightful evening together, and about ten o’clock Rad rose to go.

“Barclay and I’ll go with you a way,” said Joe. “McRae doesn’t care, as long as we’re back by eleven.”

They strolled through the brilliantly lighted streets until they had reached Rad’s home and then Joe and Jim Barclay started to return.

Finding that they were a little later than they thought, they were making a short cut through a side street, when their attention was drawn to a man who emerged with unsteady steps from a saloon on the corner. There was something familiar about him, although they could not get a clear view of his face.

Suddenly Joe gave vent to a startled ejaculation:

“Great Scott, Jim!” he exclaimed, “it’s Bugs Hartley!”

“So it is,” replied Jim, looking more closely. “And he’s pretty well loaded. What’ll McRae say?”

“What he’ll say will be plenty,” returned Joe, “and he won’t stop with talking. He’ll fire him from the team. Look here, Jim, we’ve got to get him into the hotel without Mac seeing him.”

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“How are we going to do it?” asked Jim.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to try. Hello, Hartley,” he called, coming up beside the man.

Hartley turned and looked at our hero sourly.

“Hello yourself,” he said with a lurch. “Whaz mazher?”

“Nothing’s the matter,” replied Joe, “except that you’d better come home with us right away. It’s nearly eleven o’clock and it’s time we were in bed. We don’t want McRae to make the rounds and find our rooms empty. Come along.”

Hartley, with an intoxicated man’s stubbornness, was inclined to argue the question, but Joe and Jim ranged themselves alongside and half urged, half dragged him along, until they drew near the hotel.

“You stay here,” directed Joe, who had thought out a way of smuggling his team-mate into the hotel, “while I go on and fix things up.”

He slipped in and found the head porter to whom he passed a bill, at the same time telling him what he wanted. The porter suggested that they go through the servant’s quarters in the rear of the hotel and upstairs by a freight elevator that he arranged to have in readiness. Joe went back to where he had left the others, and by dint of strenuous efforts he and Jim finally got Hartley up to his room without detection. There they surrendered him to the tender mercy of his room-mate, [190] who helped him to get undressed and put him to bed.

Joe and Jim adjourned to their own room. They were flustered and distressed. They felt bitterly indignant at Hartley who, by his recklessness, was threatening to wreck the chances of the team. Yet they felt that they could not have acted differently from what they had.

“He’s a peach, isn’t he?” said Jim, indignantly.

“That’s what he is,” returned Joe. “And it’s his regular turn to go in the box tomorrow. He’ll be in fine condition to pitch. They’ll knock him all over the lot.”

“Just when the team was moving along so smoothly,” groaned Jim. “It’s like throwing a monkey wrench into a ship’s engines. Before you know it, the whole thing’s ready for the scrap heap.”

“It’s too bad,” assented Joe. “But all we can do is to hope that it won’t happen again. Perhaps when he comes to his senses, he’ll realize what a close call he’s had and cut out the liquor for good.”

As Joe had predicted, the Cardinals made merry with Hartley’s curves the next day and won the game with ease. Joe put the second game on the right side of the ledger, and Hughson accounted for the third. Markwith had a bad day, however, in the concluding game, and the team had to be [191] satisfied with an even break, where they had fondly hoped for three out of four or possibly a clean sweep.

They were a trifle luckier in Chicago, where they won two out of three, rain preventing the last game. Cincinnati yielded three straight, though the Queen Cityites took the fourth, and in Pittsburgh, where they wound up their first Western invasion, they broke even.

“Not so bad for a road trip, nine out of fifteen,” said Larry Barrett, as he was talking it over with Joe. “As a matter of fact it’s better than we did at home. But the Giants always have been a good road team. But now you’ve had a chance to size up every team in the league. You’ve seen their weak points and their strong ones. Tell me straight, who do you think will win the pennant?”

“The Giants,” replied Joe, without a second’s hesitation.

“That listens good,” laughed Larry. “There’s nothing like feeling sure of a thing. I only hope you’re right.”

But a time was coming when Joe would have given a great deal to be half as sure as he was that afternoon.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A CLOSE CALL

The Giants were hailed with acclamations by the New York press and public on their return. The sporting critics agreed that the team had been “licked into shape” by their astute manager in a surprisingly short time. One enthusiast even went so far as to hail them as the coming champions, a thing which vexed McRae, who knew too much of the ups and downs of baseball to want to claim a pennant before it was won.

He himself had more than one thing to worry about. The team had “got by” so far through the marvelous pitching of Hughson and Joe. Not only had they won a large proportion of their games, but they had relieved the other pitchers when games were all but lost and pulled them out of the fire. But where he had fondly counted on four first string pitchers, he suddenly found himself reduced to two who were really pitching “up to form.”

Markwith had proved to be not nearly so good as in the preceding year. He still possessed marvelous speed and his curves were breaking well, but he lacked endurance. Part of this was [193] due, perhaps, to his winter on the vaudeville stage, with its irregular hours and feverish atmosphere, and part also to the wonderful record of nineteen straight the season before. Perhaps the great strain had sapped his stamina. Whatever the cause, he could not be relied on for a full nine inning game. For six innings, he would pitch with all his old time skill and power. Then would come a bad inning and—bang! to an accompaniment of base hits, the game would go up in smoke.

Hartley also seemed to be going to pieces. His nerves were on edge. He was sullen, moody and erratic. He had never been any too strong mentally, and the life he lived had undermined his physical strength. There were times when he pitched a brilliant game and showed flashes of his old ability, but these were steadily growing fewer. McRae had by turns coaxed and threatened, but he had almost reached the limit of his patience, and Hartley’s stay with the Giants hung by a thread that might snap at any moment.

A bright element in the outlook was the very evident fact that Jim Barclay was a “comer.” Twice McRae had ventured to put him in against the weaker teams. In one case he had won, and in the other held the enemy to a tie. But he was not yet ripe enough to take a regular turn in the box. [194] Joe helped him all he could, and Robson, who tried him out each morning, was sure that in time he would develop into a star.

Joe was jubilant at the success he had met with so far. He felt stronger and better physically than he had ever felt in his life. His arm was giving him no trouble, despite the unusual demands made upon it, and he never shirked or complained if he was called out of his regular turn. As Robson confided to McRae, they had found a man at last who was a “glutton for work.”

But Joe had another object of devotion outside of his attachment to his team, and shortly after the return from the first Western trip he was lifted into the seventh heaven of delight by the receipt of a dainty letter in feminine handwriting that told him Mabel was coming to New York. She did not know how long she should stay, but it would be for a week at least. Reggie was coming with her. She was not sure at what hotel she should stop, but if Joe would like to have her do so, she would call him up by ’phone and tell him where she was stopping.

If Joe would like!

His blood raced wildly a few days later when he took up the telephone and heard Mabel’s voice.

“Is that you, Joe?” she asked. “This is Mabel.”

“Don’t I know it?” he answered. “Tell me quick where you are!” [195]

“I’m at the Marlborough,” she answered, “but——”

“Yes, I know,” said Joe. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

He raced to the street, hailed a taxi, and in less than the promised ten minutes stood in the presence of the one person on earth he most wanted to see.

Joe had thought that it was impossible for her to be prettier or sweeter than she had been in Goldsboro, but now he knew that he had been mistaken.

“How impetuous you are!” she pouted. “You didn’t let me finish what I was saying on the ’phone.”

“I suppose a man dying of thirst is impetuous when he catches sight of water,” answered Joe. “I suppose——”

But what Joe supposed was destined to remain unspoken at that time, for just then Reggie, who had been down at the hotel office, came into the room. If he had only waited five minutes longer! Perhaps even Mabel could have been reconciled to her brother’s absence, if the blood that dyed her cheeks was any indication.

“How are you, old chap?” cried Reggie, wholly unaware that he was not wanted. “I’m no end [196] glad to see you, don’t you know. So glad that you looked us up. I hope you’ll find time to go around with us a lot while we’re here.”

“I certainly will if you will let me,” declared Joe, shaking hands with his friend. “Our team is playing at home all this week, thank fortune. I want you to be my guest at as many of the games as you care to see, and in the evenings we can take in some of the plays that are running in town, or take trips down to the seashore. There’s no better summer resort after all than little old New York.”

“I agree with you there, old man,” answered Reggie, “and we’ll be glad to put the matter to the test. But tonight I want you to stay and take dinner with us at the hotel.”

And as Mabel seconded the invitation, Joe did not have to be urged very hard. As a matter of fact, in his present mood it would have taken something like a crane and derrick to remove him from what had suddenly become the most interesting place in New York.

They had a most enjoyable dinner and it was only after he had returned to his hosts’ rooms that Joe broached the subject of Talham Tabbs.

“Have you had any news of your securities?” he asked, when he had Reggie for a moment alone.

A frown came over his friend’s face.

“Not a blessed thing doing,” he declared. “I’ve run down every clue that had the least promise [197] to it and I’m just as far away from getting them back as I’ve been from the beginning. I guess they’re past praying for.”

“Of course, you told Mabel as you promised?” ventured Joe.

“Sure thing,” said Reggie. “I told her that very night. The dear girl has helped and cheered me up in every way possible. She’s pure gold.”

Joe assented to this with what might have seemed almost unnecessary emphasis.

“Never give up the ship though, old man,” he encouraged. “We’ll lay that fellow by the heels yet. Soon or late we’ll nab him.”

“We’ll hope so,” said Reggie, with a faint smile; and as Mabel came over just then to where they were standing, the theme was changed.

They decided on several ways to pass the week agreeably, and among other things it was

settled that they should visit the Bronx Zoo, of which Mabel had often heard and which had just been adding largely to its already wonderful collection.

The next day the Giants were to play the Brooklyns, but when Joe looked out of the window, he saw that the rain was falling steadily.

“No game today if this keeps up,” was his mental comment.

[198] It did keep up until afternoon, and the game was called off. At two o’clock it cleared, and Joe called up Mabel and suggested that they should go to the Zoo that afternoon. Reggie was engaged downtown, but Mabel complied gladly with the suggestion.

They had passed two delightful hours wandering about in the famous Park when, just as they were nearing one of the animal houses, there was a sudden commotion and the crowd scattered in all directions. From within came the hoarse shouts of keepers, and attendants came running with ropes and pitchforks.

“Look out!” they shouted. “Run for your lives! Get inside the other houses! The leopard is loose!”

There was a wild panic, and the crowd rushed frantically for shelter. The doorways were blocked by a frantic, struggling mob. The screams of women and frightened children blended with the deeper shouts of the men, and the result was pandemonium.

Joe saw that there was no chance of getting inside. He seized Mabel by the arm and hurried down one of the side paths, at the foot of which was a small toolhouse whose door he saw was open.

They had nearly reached it when Mabel gave a stifled shriek.

[199] “Look!” she cried, and pointed to a clump of bushes at the side of the path and about twenty feet away.

Joe looked, and for a moment his heart stood still.

Crouching at the foot of the bushes with his tail moving slowly to and fro, was a large leopard, his yellow eyes glowing wickedly and every muscle stiffened as he prepared for a spring.

Joe had never carried a weapon, and even if he had had a revolver it is doubtful whether it would have stopped that huge body if it had come hurtling toward them. He looked wildly about him after he had thrust Mabel behind a bench.

At his feet was a jagged piece of rock weighing perhaps a pound. It was a forlorn chance but his only one.

Like a flash, he stooped, grasped it firmly, and hurled it with all his might at the leopard. The distance was so short that he could not miss, and the rock caught the brute in the neck just under the ear. There was a scream of pain and rage, the topaz glow faded from the eyes, and the beast collapsed in a crumpled heap.

Joe did not wait an instant. He was not sure whether the brute was killed or merely stunned. He took Mabel by the arm and half carrying her got her to one of the gates. He put her into a taxi standing at the curb and they were whirled downtown to the Marlborough. She was white and [200] shaken at their narrow escape and Joe himself was by no means calm. If anything had happened to Mabel! He shuddered at the thought.

“Oh, Joe, you have saved my life!” she exclaimed, when she could speak coherently. “That horrible brute!” she shuddered.

Joe wanted to tell her why that life was so [see Tr. Notes] precious to him and to urge that since he had saved it, it fairly belonged to him. But this would have been taking her at a disadvantage just then and he contented himself with the warm pressure of the little hand that rested in his and showed no inclination to withdraw.

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CHAPTER XXV

FIGHTING FOR THE LEAD

Joe chuckled to himself the next day, as he read the highly-colored stories in the papers bearing on the happening at the Park. The leopard had escaped while it was being transferred from one cage to another, and had afterward been found dead with a broken neck in a side path of the Park. There was a good deal of speculation as to how it had been killed, but apart from the fact that it had been due to a blow nothing was positively known. It was confidently predicted, however, that the whole truth would be uncovered in a day or two.

“Not unless I talk in my sleep, it won’t,” decided Joe.

He had no liking for notoriety, but it was chiefly on Mabel’s account that he kept silent. He knew how deeply she would dread having her name appear in print. She was one of those who believed that a woman’s name should appear in the papers only three times—when she was born, when she married and when she died. And Joe agreed with her. It was astonishing how he was [202] growing to agree with her on everything.

The week of Mabel's stay passed all too quickly. Joe grudged every hour of it. They went about everywhere when his duties permitted, and he had the satisfaction of winning a game under her approving eyes. When at last he saw her on the train for Goldsboro, she had promised to come to New York to see the wind-up of the season at the Polo Grounds.

"I'm looking for you to win the pennant and get into the World's Series," she said at parting. "You won't disappoint me, will you?"

"We've simply got to win it," he replied. "I need that World's Series money badly. Why if I had that I could——"

But Reggie blundered along just then, and Joe could not tell what he wanted to do with the money. But perhaps Mabel guessed.

The baseball campaign was waxing hotter and hotter. The teams were so close together that, as they say of racing horses, "one blanket would have covered them." So far, it was anybody's race. In the East, Brooklyn was making a great spurt and had drawn up close to the front. Chicago was showing the way to the Western teams, but St. Louis was crowding close at her heels. It was a ding-dong, slam-bang race, with first one and then the other showing in front, and the whole [203]
baseball public was in a state of feverish excitement. Great crowds gathered around the bulletin boards in every large city. All agreed that it was the most even race in years. Huge throngs filled the playing grounds and the game was on the topmost wave of prosperity.

When the Western teams finished their first visit East, the Chicagos were leading the league by three full games. Brooklyn was second, and St. Louis was tied with the Giants for third.

That they were not leading at this stage in the season did not greatly worry McRae. He knew what a fearful strain was on the team that went out in front and he was content to let it make the pace, as long as he could trail along within easy striking distance.

Joe, however, was not so philosophical. He had the instinct of the thoroughbred, and hated to see anyone bowling along in front of him.

"I hate to take anyone's dust," he said one day to Jim. "It makes me wild to have Chicago showing us the way."

"They'll come back to us all right," said Jim, confidently. "The last few games they've just won out and that's all. They've fallen down badly of late in their batting."

And Jim was right, for, two weeks later, Chicago had resigned the lead to Brooklyn and had fallen to the foot of the first division.

The see-saw persisted until the latter part of August. By that time "class" had begun to tell. [204]
Three teams had drawn away from all the others, and it was clear that, barring accidents, the flag would fly in one of three cities, Boston, Chicago or New York.

The Giants on their last trip West had made a runaway campaign of it. They had simply cleaned up everything. They led the league in batting and were third in fielding. But what counted most was that they were out in front ten straight games ahead of the nearest contender. The New York papers were already beginning to speculate what pitchers McRae would pin his faith to in the World's Series.

"It's our pitching staff that has carried us through so far," exulted McRae in one of his talks with Robson. "That is," he corrected, "it's the great work of Hughson and Matson. That young Barclay, too, has rounded to in fine shape. If only Markwith had kept up his great work this season, we'd be so far ahead that they couldn't see us with a telescope."

"It is too bad the way he's fallen down," mused Robson, "and Hartley too has been a big disappointment. I tell you, Mac, you never did a better stroke of work in your life than when you got Matson from St. Louis. That fellow is the biggest sensation of the year. You notice that when [205]
he's announced to pitch the crowds are almost as big as those who come out to see Hughson. I'll bet," he chuckled, "that you're going to lose that thousand dollar bonus before the season is over. He's already won fifteen games, and the way he is going it's a dead cinch that he'll get the other five."

"I'll be only too glad to lose it," grinned McRae. "He's already brought it in at the box office ten times over. You're right when you say he's been a mighty good investment. If we fly the flag in New York, he'll be responsible for it."

"It's lucky you signed him for a three-years' contract," went on Robson. "If you hadn't, every club in the league would have been offering him big money at the end of the season."

"He won't lose anything by it," declared McRae, decidedly. "If he keeps up the way he has begun, I won't hold him to the figures of his contract. He'll get a big slice of World's Series money, and I'll start him off next season at figures that will make his hair curl."

"Knock wood, Mac," counseled Robson, nervously. "I don't like to hear you talking yet of the World's Series as though it were a certainty. You're never in more danger than when you feel surest. We're not yet out of the woods, and you know as well as I that baseball is the most uncertain game in the world."

"You're right, Robbie, old boy," assented his friend. "I know that there's always a chance of [206]
falling down. I wouldn't talk this way with anyone but you. But on the dead level, I can't for the life of me see how we're going to lose unless our pitching staff goes to pieces."

Two days later the pitching staff went to pieces.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SLUMP

[207]

The trouble began with Hartley.

On the last Western trip he seemed to lose what little shred of self-control he had left, and began to drink heavily.

His comrades tried to shield him, as Joe and Jim had done on an earlier occasion, but all to no purpose. In his sober moods he was penitent and promised solemnly never to offend again. But his moral fibre had been weakened by self-indulgence, and with every debauch he became the less able to resist temptation.

McRae had pleaded with him and threatened him. He had fully resolved to release him when the season was over, but he hoped to keep him going fairly well till the end of the present year. When Hartley was "good," he was almost unhittable, and in a close finish he might come in handy.

But of late he had been losing almost every game that he pitched. Twice in one week Joe had gone in when Hartley had been batted from the mound and by superhuman exertions had just nosed out a victory. [208]

Hartley resented this bitterly. He seemed to think that Joe was trying to "show him up." He glared at our hero whenever they came near each other, growled at him in the clubhouse after the game, and on two occasions of late had tried to trip him.

Joe attributed this to his mental state, and where he would have resented, with his fists if need be, such conduct on the part of another, he passed it over pityingly in the case of Hartley.

"Bugs seems to have it in for me," he remarked to Jim one day, when they were dressing after the game. "You'd think that after I'd tried to shield him as I did in St. Louis, he'd be grateful, instead of trying to harm me in any way he could."

"It's just an illustration of the old motto: 'Do a man a favor and he'll never forgive you,'" returned Jim. "The trouble with Bugs is that he isn't right in the upper story. His nickname fits him right enough."

Finally, McRae, wrought to exasperation by the loss of a game that ought to have been won easily, gave Hartley his ten days' notice of release. And this time, although Hartley begged hard for another chance, the manager was adamant.

"It's no use, Hartley," he declared. "You've told me the same thing fifty times and you've fallen down every time. Here's where you and I part company." [209]

Hartley saw that this time McRae was really through with him. He began at once to pull wires to land a berth in some other club. But in the meantime, his unreasonable hate of Joe developed until he could think of little else.

Joe himself, although he had every reason to be glad at Hartley's departure from the club, was sincerely sorry for the plight in which the latter found himself, and took early occasion to tell him so.

"I hope you'll land something else right away, Hartley," he said, heartily. "There ought to be some years of big league pitching in you yet, and some of the other clubs will soon be after you, when they know they can get you."

"You shut up!" snarled Hartley. "I'm not asking any sympathy from you or anybody else. I was pitching in the big league when you were a busher and I'll be pitching in it yet when you're fired back to the minors. You've been trying to do me ever since you've been on the club. You've put on extra steam whenever you've followed me in a game, just to show that you could win where I was losing. I've been on to you, all right."

"If you were any one else, I'd ram those words down your throat!" exclaimed Joe, angered at finding his friendly advances met in such fashion. "But you have troubles enough just now without my adding to them. You're your own worst enemy, Hartley, and it's time you got wise to it." [210]

He turned on his heel and left him and did not see the man until noon the next day. Then Hartley approached him as he sat at the hotel table. Joe was slated to pitch that day, and as he did not like to eat a heavy meal immediately before the game, he had come down for a light lunch earlier than the rest of the team.

Hartley came up to him with a pleasant smile.

"I'm sorry I spoke to you the way I did yesterday, Matson," he said. "But I was feeling sore and wanted to take it out on somebody. I hope there's no hard feelings."

"Not in the least," said Joe, whose nature was too large to cherish a grudge. "Any man is liable to say what he doesn't mean when things aren't going just right. Just forget all about it."

He pointed to a chair opposite.

"Sit down and have a cup of coffee with me," he invited. "I was just going to order one for

myself to finish up with."

Hartley accepted the invitation and Joe signaled the waiter and gave the order. They chatted on various topics until the coffee was placed before them. Hartley motioned the waiter to put the cups down near him.

"I've got the sugar and cream right here," he said, lightly. "How many lumps of sugar, Matson?" [211]

"Two will do," answered Joe, "and just a drop of cream."

Hartley dropped two cubes in Joe's cup and at the same time slipped in a tiny white tablet that he had extracted from his vest pocket.

"There you are," he said, as he passed the cup over.

He swallowed the contents of his own cup with a gulp.

"Well, I'll have to be going," he remarked after a moment. "I understand you're going to pitch against the Phillies this afternoon. Hope you trim them, all right."

"Thanks," responded Joe. "I'll do my best, but they have a big batting streak on just now and all pitchers look alike to them. But if our boys back me up with the stick, I'll try to hold them down."

After Hartley had gone, Joe glanced at his watch. He saw that it was later than he thought and swallowed his coffee hastily. He noticed that it had rather a bitter taste, but the matter passed from his mind the next moment.

CHAPTER XXVII [212]

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Whatever the drug that Hartley had used, it was of such a nature that it did not take effect at once. Joe felt in his usual good shape for some time after he got into his baseball togs. It is true that the ball seemed to feel a little heavier than usual when he was warming up, but he suspected nothing when the time came for him to go into the box.

The first thing that he noticed was that he did not have his usual control. His curves would not break at the right place, and he could not seem to get them over the plate. Then too, his speed was missing. He called on all his resources, but the ball sailed up to the plate as "big as a balloon."

The Phillies were quick to notice that something was wrong with that "wing" of Matson's, which in previous games they had learned to respect. Before the first inning was over, they had lined out two slashing hits which, with three bases on balls, netted them three runs to start with.

"What's the matter, Matson?" asked McRae, as the Giants came in to bat. [213]

"Oh, I'm all right, I guess," answered Joe. "I'll steady down in the next inning. I guess I didn't warm up enough."

The Giants were quickly disposed of for a goose egg and Joe again took his place on the mound. He walked out to it a little unsteadily, a fact that McRae's keen eyes were quick to notice.

"If that were anybody else than Matson, I'd say he'd been drinking," he remarked to Robson.

"Nothing like that," replied Robson. "We'll see how he makes out this time."

But the very first ball he sent over, Cravath, the chief slugger of the Phillies, knocked clear over the right field fence for a home run.

A fusillade of hits followed until the bases were full.

"Look here, Matson," said McRae, sharply, walking over to him. "What's the matter with you? They've put the game on ice already. Take a brace, man."

Shouts of derision came from the Phillies' bench.

"He hasn't anything on the ball but his glove!" one of them jeered.

"It's a shame to take the money!" yelled another.

"All aboard for the airship!" cried a third.

A flush of humiliation passed over Joe's face. [214]

He could see that Robson was hurrying a couple of the second string pitchers out into a corner of the field to warm up. It was a new experience for him and a bitter one.

"I'll get them yet," he said to McRae, and the latter noticed that his voice was thick. "Let me play the inning out."

"Play ball!" called the umpire, and McRae walked back to the coaching line. Joe made a mighty effort, but the first ball he pitched was sent into left on a line, and the three men on bases scampered home.

"That's enough," cried McRae sharply, while the rejoicing Phillies held a jubilee at their bench.

“Take off your glove and go to the clubhouse.”

Joe took off his glove and with his face scarlet walked unsteadily off the field. He had been batted out of the box in one of the crucial games of the season. What would his folks say when they read of it? What would Mabel say?

By this time his head was throbbing, and every bone had its own particular ache. The shower brightened him up a little, but in a few minutes he was worse than ever, and it was all he could do to get to his hotel. There he stumbled and would have fallen if it had not been for one of the attendants. He took him to his room, where he lay down upon the bed and fell into a stupor. [215] There Jim found him when he returned and immediately called a physician. Together they worked over him until after a couple of hours the effects of the drug had been counteracted to a large extent, and although weak and white he began to feel more like his natural self.

“What on earth could have been the matter, Joe?” asked Jim. “Could it have been a case of ptomaine poisoning? All the doctor was sure of was that it was a drug or poison of some kind. What have you been eating?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” answered Joe. “In fact I just had a couple of sandwiches and an omelet for lunch. And coffee,” he added, and then as a sudden thought struck him he sat up straight in bed.

“I had some coffee with Bugs Hartley,” he added, slowly. “And it was Bugs that put the cream and sugar in both cups.”

They looked at each other for a full minute without speaking.

“I see a great light,” said Jim at last. “The first thing I shall do is to hunt up Hartley and thrash him within an inch of his life.”

“No, don’t do that,” said Joe, earnestly. “We haven’t positive proof, and it’ll only bring scandal on the game. I’ll be as well as ever in a day or two. The worst of it is that I’m afraid McRae thought I had been drinking.”

“He must know better than that,” replied Jim, indignantly. “But just to make sure I’ll give him a [216] quiet tip as to the real state of things.”

“I certainly felt sore to be batted out of the box,” said Joe, his thoughts reverting to the game. “What was the score, anyway?”

Jim hesitated a second.

“Fifteen to three,” he got out at last. Joe’s face lengthened.

“That was a massacre sure enough,” he groaned. “The biggest score any team has rolled up against us this season. Who went in after I was taken out?”

“Markwith,” answered Jim. “But he couldn’t do a thing with them. They simply slammed him to all corners of the lot. But by that time the game was gone anyway, and McRae just let him stay in and take his medicine.”

“And how did the Chicagos make out today?” asked Joe.

“They trimmed the Pittsburghs, four to three,” replied Jim. “Those fellows seem to have taken a new lease of life. A little while ago we were ten games ahead of them. Now they’re only six games behind and coming fast.”

“Their pitchers are working well too,” commented Joe. “You notice that they’re holding down their opponents to mighty small scores and they’re handing out quite a few shut-outs. We’ve got [217] our work cut out for us if we want to beat those birds.”

“And we’ll have to do it in a hurry, too,” said Jim. “The season’s pretty near an end. It’s a case of now or never.”

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CHAPTER XXVIII

LOCKING HORNS

The Giants were “slipping.”

There was no blinking the fact. The New York public admitted it with dismay. The newspapers of all the other league cities proclaimed it with delight.

Not slipping fast, but slipping surely.

Not that they were quitting. They were game to the core. Everybody was working desperately to hold on to the slender lead that they had fought for so gallantly in the early part of the season. McRae and Robson, crafty old foxes that they were, worked day and night to bolster up the weak places. They changed the batting order. They used their pinch hitters. They put the team through morning practice. They perfected the “inside stuff.” They worked every trick known to the game.

But still the Giants kept slipping. The batting was far below the usual standard. The men “fought” the ball instead of fielding it cleanly. The pitching staff was too limited. Hughson and Joe [219] were pitching magnificent ball, but they were the only first-string pitchers that could be

absolutely relied on. Some of the second string men, notably Jim, were doing well, but now that every game was so important, McRae did not dare to put them in. The strain was apt to be too much for any but the veterans.

There were times when the Giants seemed to throw off the baleful paralysis that was holding them and play in something of their old brilliant form. But too many defeats were mixed in with victories, and all the time those scrappy Chicagos, seldom losing, kept closing up the gap, until when the last week of the season arrived they were right on the Giants' heels.

By the mere chance of the schedule, the Chicagos were to wind up the season with the New Yorks on the Polo Grounds. Four games were to be played. Before the series commenced, the Giants were just one game in the lead. If the Chicagos could take three games out of the four, they would win the championship.

The Giants had the advantage of playing on their own grounds and in the presence of the home crowds. That was an advantage not to be despised. Moreover, they only had to win two out of the four, while the Chicagos were required to win three.

[220] But, on the other hand, the men from the Windy City were on the aggressive, while the Giants were on the defensive. And the Chicagos had been climbing while the New Yorks had been slipping. These facts had a significance all their own, and despite the apparent odds in favor of the home team, opinion was about evenly divided as to who would bear off the victory.

McRae figured on pitching Hughson in the first game of the series. The veteran had always had the "Indian sign" on the Chicagos, and the chances were that he would win his game. If he did, the Giants would only have to take one out of the remaining three. Joe and Markwith would try for the second and third. If by an evil fate they lost both, McRae could again call on Hughson for the fourth and deciding game.

On the night before the first game, McRae dropped into the uptown hotel where the Chicagos were quartered, to have a word of friendly greeting with Brennan, the manager of the Windy City warriors.

While they were bitter enemies on the ball field, each fighting like a wildcat for every shred of advantage, they were the best of friends when once they had discarded their uniforms and gotten into their street clothes. In this they were not unlike the lawyers who berate each other bitterly while the case is on, and after the court has adjourned go to lunch together arm in arm.

[221] Brennan saw his opponent enter, and, rising from the group of reporters who were trying to get from him his views on the series, came forward to greet him with extended hand, a broad grin on his features.

"How are you, John?" he queried. "Have you come in to ask me to let you off easy tomorrow?"

"Not a bit of it, Roger," laughed McRae as he shook hands. "I simply heard that there were a lot of dead ones in town and I wanted to know what cemetery you'd prefer to be buried in. I'll make it Woodlawn or Greenwood or any place you say. Or if you like, I'll ship your remains back to Chicago."

"You always were a good bluffer, John," retorted Roger. "But I can see that you're just whistling to keep your courage up. When we go back to Chicago it won't be in boxes, but in Pullmans; and we're going to take the pennant along with us."

"Where do you get that stuff?" rejoined McRae. "I'll set the squirrels after you if you don't stop your foolishness. I'm only wondering whether I'll take four straight or let you have just one of the series as a sort of booby prize."

They chaffed each other good-naturedly for a while, to the great delight of the reporters and hotel guests, who had gathered in a dense crowd about them.

[222] "You've got only a one-man team, John," Brennan wound up. "Hughson's carried the team along for years. If it hadn't been for him you wouldn't have won a pennant in the last ten years."

"How about Matson?" parried McRae. "Do you remember the last game he twirled against you in Chicago?"

Brennan winced and the crowd laughed at the memory of that game, which had been a Waterloo for the men of the Windy City.

"He caught us off our stride that day," he admitted, "and we're aching to get at him. We're all tuned up to knock him out of the box."

A little more banter, and McRae rose to go.

"Sorry to have to leave you," he remarked, "but I have an appointment to see a man about setting up a new pennant pole at the Polo Grounds."

"I'm ahead of you there, John," laughed Brennan. "I ordered mine before I left Chicago."

"You'll be sending a wire in a day or two to countermand the order," the Giant leader prophesied. "By the way, Roger," he went on, dropping his scoffing tone, "if you want to use the grounds for morning practice, I'll fix it up so that you can divide the time with my boys."

"That's very white of you, John," replied Brennan warmly, "and I appreciate it. But I guess I'll stick to the regular rule and let you have it all to yourself. Thanks, though, just the same."

[223] They shook hands and parted with the mutual respect of hard fighters and gallant sportsmen.

The city was wild with excitement and it was a foregone conclusion that the four games would draw bigger crowds than had ever before been packed into the Polo Grounds.

Mabel, true to her promise, had come to the city, accompanied by Reggie, and Joe had secured seats for them in a box so located that they could follow every move of the game. It is needless to say that every spare minute that he could take from his work was spent in the vicinity of the Marlborough Hotel, at which the visitors were again staying.

“You simply must win, Joe,” Mabel declared. “You surely wouldn’t have the heart to lose after I’ve come all the way from Goldsboro.”

“I haven’t any heart to lose anyway,” replied Joe. “I lost that long ago.”

“I see Hughson is going to pitch the first game,” said Mabel, hastily changing the subject to a safer ground. “Do you think he will win?”

“Sure I do,” replied Joe, enthusiastically. “He’s the greatest pitcher that ever threw a ball.”

“They say there’s a good deal of professional jealousy among artists,” laughed Mabel, “but you don’t seem to be troubled that way.”

“Not a particle where Hughson is concerned,” affirmed Joe, stoutly. “He’s one of the best [224] friends I have on the team and I root for him for all I’m worth every time he goes into the box.”

“You’ll pitch the second game, I suppose,” she went on.

“I think that’s the program just at present, but you never can tell. Something might come up that would make McRae change his mind five minutes before the game begins.”

“I’ll have an advantage over the other pitchers. They’ll only have one glove while I’ll have two.”

Mabel opened her eyes and was about to ask an explanation, but as Joe tapped his pocket, she remembered the glove that she had given him at Goldsboro and blushed in confusion.

She was never lovelier than when she blushed, and there is no knowing what would have happened right then and there, if Reggie had not come on the scene. Joe liked Reggie, but there were times when he certainly was a nuisance.

“Well, Joe, how are you feeling?” asked Reggie amiably, as they shook hands. “Not suffering from palpitation of the heart or anything like that, I suppose?”

To tell the truth, Joe’s heart was palpitating very strongly just at that moment. But it was not the thought of the big games that caused it. Perhaps Mabel could have guessed the reason more [225] accurately than Reggie.

“I never felt better,” Joe replied.

“Going to put it all over the Chicagos, I hope,” continued Reggie.

“That’s what we’re figuring on,” answered Joe. “But those fellows are going great guns just now and it will be a man’s job to beat them. By the way,” he added, changing the subject, “have you found any trace of Tabbs?”

“Not a thing,” replied Reggie gloomily. “I guess I’ll have to charge that ten thousand up to experience. It’s coming near time to report to my father and I’d rather be shot than do it.”

The first game justified the choice of McRae. Hughson was never in better form. He simply toyed with the opposing batsmen. His famous fadeaway was working to perfection. Twice he mowed down the side in one-two-three order. His control was absolute and not an enemy reached his base on balls. Three times there were men on the bags, once through an error and twice as the result of hits, but Hughson tightened up and they never got farther than second. It was a superb exhibition of twirling, and amid the frantic applause of the vast crowd the game ended with the score:

New Yorks 5, Chicagos 0.

First blood for the Giants!

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CHAPTER XXIX

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

There was great hilarity in the Giants’ camp that night, and this feeling was shared by the entire city. Now the Chicagos would have to take all the remaining games to win, and with Joe and Hughson pitching two of them, this seemed altogether unlikely.

Joe was on his way to the grounds the next morning to get a little preliminary practice. He just wanted to “toss up a few” to make sure that his arm was in perfect working order for the game that afternoon. He wanted to settle the thing then and there, so that the long strain would be over and the two remaining games would be simply for the sake of finishing out the schedule.

He had plenty of time, and for the sake of the walk he left the elevated train two stations this side of the Polo Grounds and walked north through Eighth Avenue. There were many vacant lots in this locality, and there were not very many people on the avenue at that hour.

He glanced carelessly at a man who passed him with his hat drawn down over his face. It struck him that there was something about the fellow that was vaguely familiar. Where had he seen that lean, sharp-featured face? [227]

Suddenly it came to him and he turned about like a flash.

The man was Talham Tabbs!

By this time the crazy man was nearly a block away, and he too was looking back as though the recognition had been mutual.

Joe did not hesitate for an instant. Fate had thrown this chance in his way and he might never have another. He started to run and then checked himself for fear of alarming his quarry and subsided into a swift walk.

But the cunning of the insane man had seen Joe's first movement and interpreted it correctly. He turned into a vacant lot and broke into a run.

Joe hesitated no longer at following his example; and the next moment a lively chase was on.

By the time Joe turned into the lot, Tabbs was three hundred feet ahead and running hard. But he was no match for a young man who was in the pink of condition and who was able to circle the bases in fifteen seconds flat. In less than a minute Joe was close on his heels. Tabbs turned and twisted desperately and just as Joe reached out his hand to grasp him, he dodged under his arms [228] and doubled on his tracks. Joe swung around as though on a pivot, and in another moment his hand was on the collar of the panting man. He dug his knuckles into Tabbs' neck and the latter ceased to struggle.

For a moment neither spoke, each trying to regain his breath. Then, to Joe's astonishment, Tabbs grinned affably and twiddled his fingers as he had done previously in the Riverside jail.

"Hello, brother," greeted Tabbs. "That was a good game of tag, wasn't it? I guess I'm it."

There was such an utter absence of malice or resentment, that Joe, who had been bracing himself for a struggle, was taken aback, and his heart smote him a little as he saw Tabbs' friendly signal. But he was quick to follow his lead.

"I guess you are," he laughed. "It's just the morning for a little run. You're certainly a dandy sprinter."

A look of gratified vanity came over Tabbs.

"Let's try it again," he suggested. "I'll chase you this time and I'll bet you can't get away from me."

"That's a good idea," agreed Joe, "but first I want to rest a little. It isn't every one who can keep it up like you, you know. Suppose we go down to your rooms and have a little talk about lodge matters first. Where are you living?"

"Up here in Amsterdam Avenue," replied Tabbs, promptly. "Come right along." [229]

They walked out to the avenue, Joe cudgeling his brains as to what the next step should be. As they reached the corner, he saw one of the policemen who had been assigned to duty at the Polo Grounds. He was in citizen's clothes and bowed cordially to Joe.

"Excuse me just a moment, while I speak to this friend of mine," said Joe to his companion.

"Certainly," said Tabbs, politely.

Joe led Reardon, the policeman, aside.

"Reardon," he said, hurriedly, and in a low voice, "this man is crazy. I want you to keep out of sight but follow us. When you see us go into a house, call up the Marlborough and tell a Mr. Varley there to come up right away. Then stand guard at the door until I turn this man over to you to be sent back to the asylum he escaped from."

"All right," said Reardon, who had been too long on the force to be surprised at anything.

A few minutes' walk brought Joe and Tabbs to a comfortable old-fashioned boarding house.

"Here we are," the crazy man said, and led the way to a large room on the second floor. Joe noted in a corner a large valise with Tabbs' initials on it.

They sat down and chatted about various things, and except for an occasional foolish remark [230] that had no bearing on the subject, Joe would not have known that he was talking to a lunatic. Tabbs had evidently been a man of keen intelligence and wide observation. Joe kept leading him on, trying desperately to kill time till Reggie should arrive.

"If you're rested enough now, we'll go out and finish that game of tag," Tabbs had just remarked, when a taxi whirled up to the door. Joe flung open the door of the room and Reggie came flying up the stairs and dashed in, followed by Reardon, who carefully closed the door and put his broad shoulders against it.

Tabbs looked in surprise at this sudden invasion of his rooms. Then he recognized Reggie and smiled genially.

"How do you do, Mr. Varley?" he said.

"Where are my securities?" demanded Reggie, breathless with excitement.

"Your securities?" repeated Tabbs. "Let me see. Perhaps I have them over here."

He walked over to the valise, unlocked it, took out a package and looked it over.

"These must be the ones," he continued. "They've been in my way for some time and I've thought more than once of throwing them away. I was trying to remember how I got hold of them."

With trembling fingers Reggie thumbed the papers. Then he gave an exclamation of delight. [231]

"Every one of them here!" he cried. "Joe, I can never thank you enough for getting them back for me."

"Well, now," said Tabbs, blandly, "let's go and have that game of tag."

"I'm afraid we'll have to let that go just now," said Joe, rising to go. "But this friend of mine will take my place," pointing to Reardon.

Tabbs assented cheerfully and waved a gay farewell to Joe and Reggie, as they went downstairs to the taxi, leaving him in Reardon's custody.

"Poor old fellow!" sighed Joe, as he looked for the last time on the wreck of what had been a splendid man.

Reggie was eager to share his rejoicing with Mabel and Joe would have gone with him if he could. But so much time had been consumed that the young pitcher had no more than time to get a light lunch and hurry off to the Polo Grounds.

But when he reached the clubhouse, distressing news awaited him. A disaster had come upon the New York camp.

The great Hughson had had his arm twisted in an auto accident and was out of the game for the series!

Joe was knocked off his balance by the news. He realized at once the far reaching [232] consequences of the calamity. He knew the panic it would create in the New York camp and the renewal of heart and hope that would come to the enemy now that their most dreaded foe was out of the running.

McRae was stamping about the clubhouse like a crazy man. Robson sat moodily in one corner, his arms folded on his breast. The players, in various conditions of undress, were white and shaken at the report that had just come over the telephone from Hughson's house.

It was not advisable to approach McRae in his present frantic condition and Joe made his way over to Robson.

"How did it happen?" he asked. "And how bad is it?"

"So bad that it may knock us out of winning the pennant," groaned Robson. "I don't know anything about how it happened. Mrs. Hughson, who called us up, was so excited that she couldn't tell us very clearly. Mac has sent for a taxi, and as soon as it comes we're going up to Hughson's house."

At that moment word was brought that the taxicab was waiting, and McRae and Robson hurried toward the door.

McRae caught sight of Joe standing near.

"You come along with us," he ordered. "Even if Hughson's arm is hurt, his tongue and brain are [233] probably all right, and he may be able to give you some fresh pointers on those Chicago sluggers after facing them yesterday."

Joe was only too willing, and they bundled in. The driver, under the promise of a generous tip, made fast time on his way to Hughson's house.

They found the great pitcher reclining on a lounge with his arm in bandages and his face drawn with pain. He greeted them with a smile that was evidently an effort.

"Come up to look at the wreck?" he inquired, as they crowded anxiously around him. "Well, I'm worth a dozen dead men yet, even if this arm of mine is on the blink."

"In the name of hard luck," moaned McRae, "how did it all happen?"

"Got caught between two trolley cars," replied Hughson. "I was in a taxi on Eighth Avenue on my way to the grounds and the driver tried to cross the tracks. Thought he could just slip by between cars coming in opposite directions, but missed his guess. I might just as well have been killed as not, but all hands did their best, and I got off with a wrenched back and a strained arm."

"You're sure there's nothing broken?" inquired Joe anxiously.

"Dead sure," was the reply. "The doctor's just got through fixing me up, and he says that there [234] are no bones or ligaments broken. But I'll be on the shelf for two or three weeks."

"Two or three weeks!" groaned McRae. "And this series will be over in two or three days!"

"It's tough luck," said Hughson bitterly. "I'd have given my share of the World's Series money not to have had this thing happen."

"Just when we had those fellows on the run, too," remarked Robson gloomily. "That beating you gave them yesterday took a good deal of vim out of them and we'd probably have cleaned 'em up today. But when they hear of this they'll be like wild men and there'll be no holding them."

"I'll trust Matson to tame them," was Hughson's comforting remark. "He's as good a man at

this moment as I ever dared to be."

"Nobody's as good as you are, Hughson," was Joe's answer to this generous praise. "But you can do an awful lot for me just now in giving me pointers on what to feed those fellows," he added.

"And you'll have to hurry," broke in McRae, looking at his watch. "We haven't much more than time now to get back to the grounds."

For five minutes there was an animated discussion, and then, with a cordial goodby to Hughson, the three entered the waiting taxicab and were whirled back to the Polo Grounds.

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CHAPTER XXX

A GLORIOUS SUCCESS

Consternation sat on every face. The easy confidence of the night before was gone. A thunderbolt had come out of the blue. The chief prop had been knocked from under them. The easy way in which Hughson had tamed the men from the wild and woolly West had made it seem a dead certainty that he would win if he should be called on to repeat.

There was hot scurrying to and fro among the leaders. McRae and Robson, with drawn faces, were deep in discussion as to the best thing to be done. The program would have to be radically changed.

McRae came hurrying over to Joe when the latter entered the clubhouse.

"I was going to pitch you today," he declared, "but I've changed my mind. I'll have to save my ace to take the last trick, if necessary. I'm going to keep you for the final. Markwith goes in today and I'll take a chance on Barclay tomorrow. That spitter of his may fool them."

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But neither Markwith nor Barclay fulfilled the hope of their manager. The Chicagos, who were like wild men, now that they seemed to have another chance with the dreaded Hughson out of the way, batted like fiends, and the two games went to their credit by scores of seven to two and six to four. Jim had held them to a tie up to the eleventh inning, but then he faltered and they batted in the winning runs.

Now the score was even. The result of the last game would decide the championship and tell whether the flag would fly in the East or the West.

It was up to Joe. Upon his shoulders rested the fortunes of his team. Would he be equal to the task? That question was being asked in every city between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Reputation, the pennant, the chance to get into the World's Series—all of these depended upon the skill and strength of that right arm of his.

The enormous crowd that packed the stands gave him a tremendous greeting when he came on the field and began to warm up. But in all that sea of human faces, the only one that Joe looked for was in an upper box where a handkerchief waved at him. And in the pocket of his baseball shirt a tiny glove lay close to his heart.

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"How did he warm up, Robbie?" asked McRae anxiously, as the bell rang for the game to begin and Robson came back to where he was sitting on the players' bench.

"All to the good," declared Robson. "The ball came into my mitt almost hard enough to knock me down. They won't be able to see them."

For a moment, as Joe took up his position, he had a touch of stage fright. His head whirled and everything seemed to swim before his eyes. Then his vision cleared, his heart ceased its thumping, and his nerves became like steel.

"Zimmie," the big third baseman of the Chicagos, who led off in the batting order, swaggered up to the plate, swinging three bats. He threw away two of them and gripped the remaining one tightly and glared at Joe.

"Trot them out, kid," he called, "and I'll murder them. You're only a false alarm, anyway."

Joe shot the first one over for a beautiful strike and the crowd yelled in delight.

"That's the way, old man!" sang out Larry from second. "They can't touch you."

The second was a ball and the next a foul. Then a high, fast one with a hop to it, eluded Zimmie's bat and sent him back to the bench looking sheepish.

The next one up hit a slow one to short that got to first in plenty of time, and the third man closed the inning with a two-balls-three-strikes record.

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A tempest of cheers compelled Joe to remove his cap as he came in to the bench.

"You're going like a runaway horse, Matson," said McRae. "Keep it up and the flag is ours."

"We'll hand you a couple of runs to start off with," declared Larry, as he strode to the plate.

But neither in that inning nor in the next three, did the promised runs come in. Hamilton, the Chicago pitcher, was at his best, and his famous drop ball was working to perfection. It seemed

as though the game were going to resolve itself into a duel between the pitchers, and the crowd held its breath as man after man went down before the rival boxmen.

"Isn't he a wizard?" exclaimed McRae, as Joe mowed the enemy down as fast as they came to the plate. "They're so much putty in his hands. That rise ball of his has a jump on it that's got those fellows buffaloed. They miss it by six inches."

"And his fadeaway," put in Robson. "Do you see how he mixes it in with the fast ones? He's outguessing them all the way."

Joe's heart was beating high with elation. The sense of mastery thrilled him. He was absolutely in control of all his curves. They broke just where he wanted them. The Chicagos knew that their only chance was to rattle him, and their coachers danced up and down on the side lines, hurling [239] out jibes and jeers that they hoped would "get under his skin." But they fell away from him like water from a duck's back.

But in the fifth inning the Giants "cracked."

Denton, at third, fumbled an easy roller and when at last he had stopped juggling the ball, he threw over the first baseman's head and the batter got to third on the error. The fielders played close in to get him at the plate, but a "Texas leaguer" that Larry could easily have gobbled if he had been in his usual position, dropped behind him and the man on third came home for the first run of the game.

The next man up rapped a fly to right, that Curry lost in the sun, and made the round of the bases, driving his comrade in ahead of him. Three runs to the good for the Chicagos and not one of them earned!

Joe put on steam and fanned the rest of the side, but the damage had been done. In so close a game as that, three runs seemed like a winning lead.

McRae was raging, and stormed among his players like a cyclone as they came in to bat.

"Get after them!" he cried, furiously. "Give Matson something to go on. Your bats have holes in them. You're hitting like a lot of old women. Knock the ball out of the lot. We've got to win."

They made a gallant effort and got two men on bases. But although they hit the ball hard a [240] Chicago fielder always seemed to be in front of it.

The sixth inning was full of thrills and it looked for a time as though the New Yorks would score, and score heavily.

Joe had got through the first half with nothing against him but a base on balls—a decision which led to an acrimonious discussion between McRae and the umpire in which the scrappy manager narrowly escaped being ordered off the field.

In the Giant's half, Iredell, the first man up, was given his base on balls. McRae thought he detected signs of wobbling on Hamilton's part and began to "ride" him from the first base side lines. Larry, who was coaching at third, ably seconded his chief, and the crowd joined in trying to make the pitcher "crack."

Hamilton was a veteran and used to such tactics, and ordinarily they would not have affected him. But there was so much at stake on this game and the strain up to now had been so tremendous that for a moment he faltered and passed the second man.

The yells of the crowd increased at this, nor was his agitation lessened when McRae entered a vehement protest against his delivery, claiming that he lifted his foot from the ground when releasing the ball.

There was some ground for this and the umpire cautioned Hamilton, who by this time was [241] plainly rattled. He pulled himself together, though, and made the next batter put up a high fly to short.

The next man went out on strikes and Chicago breathed more easily. But Hamilton was not yet himself and a third pass filled the bases.

The crowd was crazed with excitement now, and Meyers, the next man up, was entreated to "kill the ball" as he came to the plate.

There were "two and three" on him when at last he got the ball he wanted. It left his bat with the crack of a bullet and soared high in the air toward center. It had all the earmarks of a home run and the crowd went wild, while the three men on bases tore around them toward the plate like so many runaway horses.

On, on, the ball went as though it were going clear to the fence. But Lange, than whom there was no swifter center fielder in either of the major leagues, had started for it at the crack of the bat, running with his back to the ball and looking back over his shoulder from time to time to gauge its course. At the last second he leaped high in the air, clutched the ball with one hand, and fell to the ground, rolling over and over, but coming up still holding on to the ball.

A groan rose from the New York bench and the yells of the jubilant crowd in the stands were [242] suddenly stilled. It was hard to have their soaring hopes so suddenly brought to earth. But it was a magnificent play, and generous applause greeted the center fielder as he came in to be hugged and pawed by his exulting comrades.

At the "lucky seventh" the crowd rose and stretched loyally but in vain. Only two more innings remained and the crowds were like mourners at a funeral.

Five minutes later they were shouting and screaming like maniacs.

It was the last half of the eighth, and the Giants' turn had come. Larry led off with a rattling two base hit to right. Denton sacrificed him to third. Curry lined out a single to center, bringing Larry home. He stole second by a close margin. Byrnes clipped a two bagger just inside the third base line, and Willis cleaned up by lacing a three bagger between left and center. The score was tied and the crowd promptly went mad. The next two men went out in order, and the Chicagos, sore and raging, came in for their last time at bat.

But Joe felt now that he had the strength of ten. The ball shot over the plate like a bullet and not a man reached first.

"Now for the World's Series, boys!" encouraged McRae. "Now for fifty thousand dollars! Here's where you win it!"

But it was the tail of the batting order that was coming up now. The first two men were easy outs and then Joe came to the plate. [243]

"It looks like an extra inning game," was the remark that went around the stands.

Like all pitchers, Joe was only a moderately good batter and his average hovered around the two hundred mark.

Perhaps on this account Hamilton was too confident, for he took a chance and put one over "in the groove." Joe caught it square on the end of the bat and the ball sailed far away into right over the fielder's head.

Joe was off with the crack of the bat. He rounded first like a frightened jackrabbit and straightened out for second. The ground fell away from under his flying feet. He was running like the wind. He heard the frantic roar of the crowds, the yells of the coachers. On he went toward third, touched it and thundered down to the plate. He knew the ball was coming, he saw the catcher set himself. Twenty feet from home he launched himself into the air and slid into the rubber, just eluding the catcher's outstretched hand.

The game was over, the Giants had won the pennant, and had put themselves in line for the great Series that would decide the championship of the world!

How they came through that ordeal will be told in our next volume entitled: "Baseball Joe in the World's Series; Or, Pitching for the Championship." [244]

Joe could never quite remember just what happened for the next few minutes. The gleeful shouts of his team-mates, the rush and roar of the great crowd that surged down upon him, the tugging and pulling that seemed to be rending him apart—all this he sensed but dimly. He only knew that he was blissfully, supremely happy. He had played his part gallantly. He had made good on the Giants. He had won the flag!

But had he not won more than that? Was he not now free to speak? He touched the little glove that lay in his pocket.

He dressed as rapidly as he could and emerged with Jim into the street. He hailed a passing taxi.

"Where are you going, Joe?" asked Jim.

"Going?" repeated Joe. "I'm going straight to the Marlborough Hotel."

THE END

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team. He got to boarding school but found it harder making the team there than it was getting on the nine at home.

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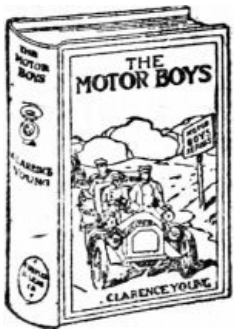

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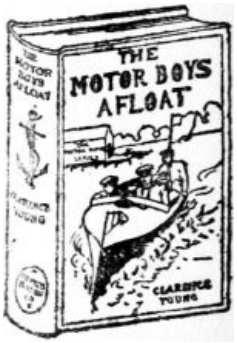

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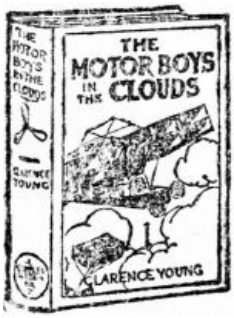

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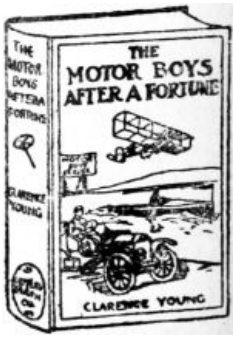

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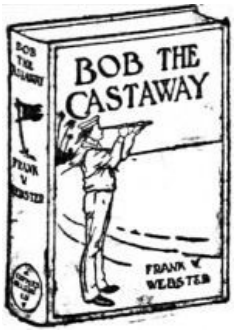

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A List of Illustrations has been provided for the convenience of the reader.

Printer, punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected, except as noted below.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

Author's long dash style has been preserved.

Page 200: "Joe did not wait an instant. He was not sure" (first line of the last paragraph) is a duplicate of the first line two paragraphs earlier (printer's error); *changed to* "Joe wanted to tell her why that life was so" (corrected line was obtained from another printing).

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