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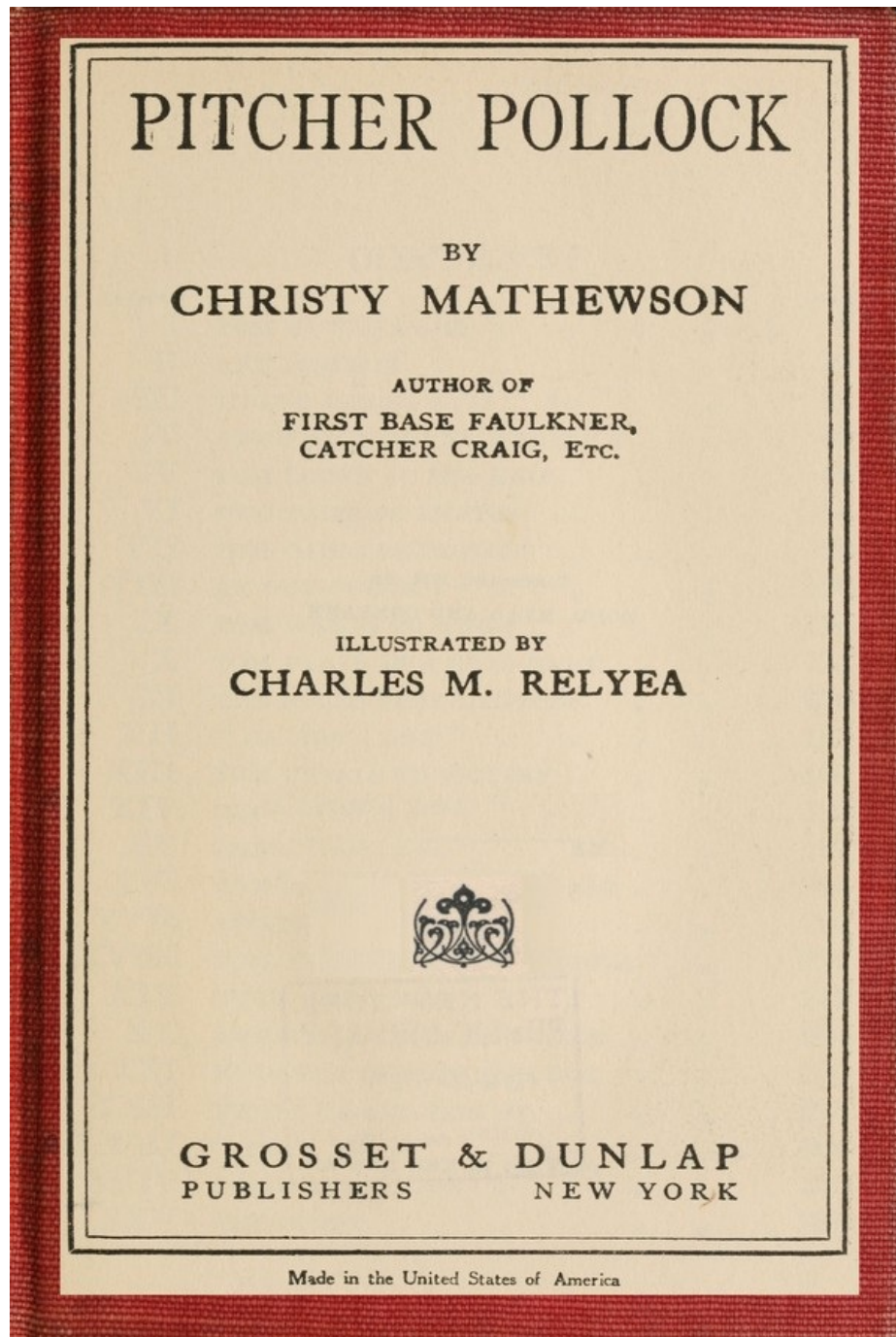
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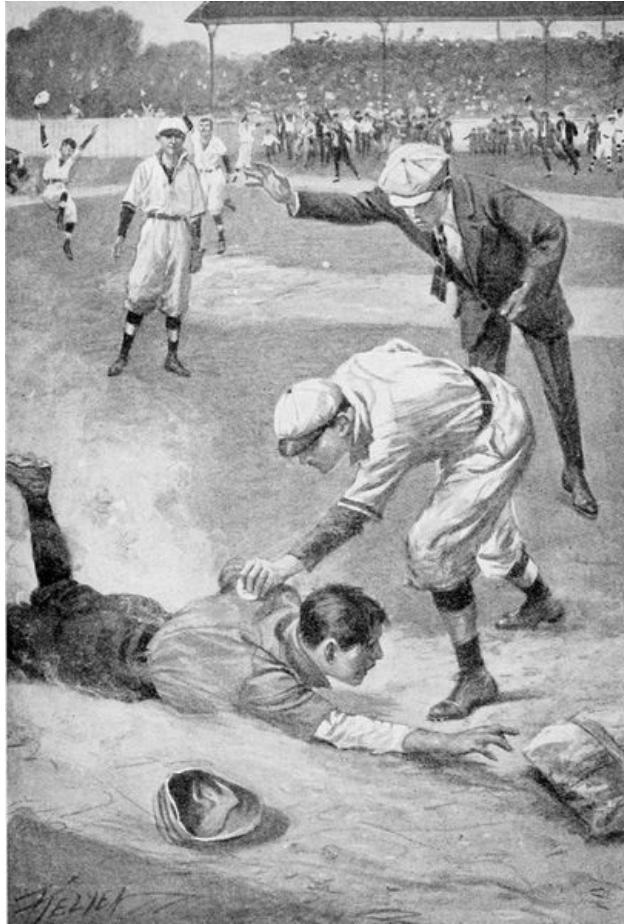
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PITCHER POLLOCK ***



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PITCHER POLLOCK



[Down came Bert's arm and it was all over](#)

PITCHER POLLOCK

BY

CHRISTY MATHEWSON

AUTHOR OF

FIRST BASE FAULKNER,
CATCHER CRAIG, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

CHARLES M. RELYEA



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[Down came Bert's arm and it was all over](#)

Frontispiece

["I was wondering sir," said Tom, "if after I've paid that bill I couldn't have the pump"](#)

FACING PAGE

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["Grasp the ball firmly," recited Sidney, "between the thumb and the first two fingers"](#)

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["Now you watch, son. Better get behind me so's you can see"](#)

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PITCHER POLLOCK

[1]

[2]

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CHAPTER I

TOM HUNTS A JOB

"Want to hire a boy?"

Mr. Cummings looked around and across the showcase at the youth who stood there.

"Want to what?" he asked.

"Hire a boy. I'm looking for a job."

"Oh." Mr. Cummings turned back to his task of rearranging a number of carpenter's squares in a green box and made no other reply for a moment. The boy waited silently, watching interestedly. Finally, fixing the cover on the box and laying it on a shelf, "Ever worked in a hardware shop?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"I didn't suppose you had. What use would you be to me then, eh?" Mr. Cummings peered sharply at him.

"I could sweep and run errands and—and wash windows and the like of that," replied the applicant imperturbably. "I'll tell you how it is, sir. I live out to Derry, and——"

"What's your name?"

"Tom Pollock, sir."

"I didn't know there were any Pollocks in Derry."

"There ain't, sir, except me. I live with my uncle, Mr. Bowles."

"Israel Bowles?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hm. So you're Israel's nephew, eh? Didn't know he had any kin. Well, all right. Then what?"

"I'm going to high school next week," went on the boy. He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully and sometimes correcting himself as he talked. "I got to live in town because, you see, I couldn't get back and forth every day."

"Aren't the trains running out to Derry any more?"

"Yes, sir, but—but it would cost too much, you see. So I thought maybe if I could get some work here in Amesville——"

"How in tarnation do you expect to work and go to school too?"

"I don't have to go to school until half-past eight and I'd be all through by three, and I thought if I could find some work to do in the morning before school and then in the afternoon——"

"I see. Well, I guess you wouldn't be worth much money to anyone, working that way, son."

"No, sir, that's what I thought. I wasn't expecting to get much, either."

"Weren't, eh? How much?"

"Well, about——" He hesitated, viewing the merchant anxiously. "Of course I don't know much about what folks pay, but Uncle Israel said——"

"Hold on a bit," interrupted Mr. Cummings suspiciously. "Did that old—did Israel Bowles tell you to come to me?"

"No, sir. I just started up at the other end of town and worked along. I've been at it most all morning."

"Hm. Didn't find anything, eh?"

"Not yet," answered Tom cheerfully. "I got—I've got the other side of the street yet, though. An'—and I ain't—haven't been on the side streets at all. I guess I'll find something."

"Hope you do," said the merchant. "But I guess you wouldn't be much use to me. How much did you say you wanted?"

"Two—two and a half a week," said the boy. He gulped as he said it and looked questioningly at the merchant. "I thought," he continued as Mr. Cummings's countenance told him nothing, "that if I could get enough to pay my lodging I'd make out, sir."

"Got to eat, though, haven't you?"

"I—I got a little saved up, sir. I worked for a man over to—over in Fairfield most of the summer."

"What for? Isn't your uncle hiring help any more? Hasn't given up farming, has he?"

"No, sir, but—well, I made more working for Mr. Billings."

"I'll bet you did!" Mr. Cummings chuckled. "I know that uncle of yours, son, from A to Izzard, and there isn't a meaner old skinflint in Muskingum County! He owes me nearly sixty-five dollars, and he's been owing it for nearly six years, and I guess he'll keep on owing it unless I sue him for it. Bought a pump of me and then claimed it didn't work right and wouldn't ever send it back or pay for it, the old rascal! Yes, I guess sure enough you did better working somewheres else, son!"

Tom had nothing to say to this. Perhaps, as a dutiful nephew, he should have stood up for Uncle Israel, but the hardware dealer's estimate of Mr. Bowles was a very general one and Tom had long since become accustomed to hearing just such remarks passed. Finally, as the merchant seemed to have finished talking, Tom said:

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[5]

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[7]

"I'm sorry. Well, I guess I'll be going on. Unless—unless you think maybe—"

"Wait a minute." Mr. Cummings had opened the slide at the back of the showcase and was absent-mindedly rearranging some boxes of pocket-knives and scissors. At last, shutting the slide again briskly: "Look here, son, maybe you and I can make a dicker yet. Two and a half isn't a whole lot of money, even if times are pretty bad. I might give you that much and not go broke, eh? How long do you suppose you could work here at the store ordinarily?"

"Why, I could be around by half-past six, I think, sir, and work until about eight-twenty-five. The school ain't—isn't far. Then after school I'd stay around as long as you wanted me. I—I'd like mighty well to work for you, sir."

[8]

"Hm. Well, you look pretty strong and healthy. There'd be a lot of heavy work to do. Hardware's hefty stuff to handle, son." Tom nodded, undismayed. "I wasn't exactly thinking of hiring anyone yet awhile. Usually along about November we have an extra helper, but fall is a dull time, mostly. What about Saturdays? Don't have to go to school then, do you?"

"No, sir, I could be here all day Saturday. I forgot to tell you that. I'd like, though, to get the seven-forty-six train Saturday nights. I'm aiming to get home over Sundays. Of course, if there was a lot to do, I'd be perfectly willing to stay and help, sir."

"We-ell—" Mr. Cummings frowned thoughtfully at a lurid powder advertisement that hung nearby. "Tell you what you do, son. Had your dinner yet?"

"No, sir."

"You go and have your dinner and then come back. My partner will be in at one and I'll see what he says. Then, if he don't want you, you haven't wasted any time and you can try somewhere else."

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"Thank you. What time'll I come back?"

"Say half-past one. That will give you most an hour for dinner. Guess if you've been walking around town all forenoon you'll want most an hour, eh?" And Mr. Cummings smiled in a friendly, almost jovial way.

"Yes, sir," returned Tom. His own smile was fainter. "I'll be back then. Much obliged. An'—and I hope the other—I hope your partner will let me come."

"We'll see." Mr. Cummings waved his hand. "I'll let you know when you come back." He watched the boy speculatively as the latter strode unhurriedly down the aisle and out of the door. Then, "Miss Miller," he called, "look up Israel Bowles's account and give me the figures."

At the back of the store, behind the window of the cashier's partitioned-in desk, a face came momentarily into sight and a brown head nodded.

Out on the sidewalk Tom Pollock paused and thrust his hands into his pockets. It was the noon hour and Main Street was quite a busy scene. Almost directly across the wide thoroughfare the white enamelled signs of a lunch room gleamed appealingly. Tom looked speculatively at the next store on his route, which was a tiny shoe shop with one diminutive window filled with cheap footwear. It didn't promise much, he thought. Then a hand went into a pocket and he pulled out a crumpled dollar bill and some silver. He frowned as he hastily calculated the sum of it, selected two ten-cent pieces, and returned the rest to the pocket. With the two coins in the palm of his hand he crossed the street to the lunch room and found a seat. The back of the room held counters with stools in front of them that folded out of the way when not in use, but near the entrance two lines of chairs stood against the walls. The right arm of each chair was widened into a sort of shelf large enough to hold a plate and a cup and saucer. Above the rows of chairs the neat white walls were inscribed with lists of viands and their prices. Tom sank into his chair with a sigh, stretched out his tired feet, and studied the menu across the room. There was no hurry, for he had three-quarters of an hour before he would return to Cummings and Wright's to learn the verdict. The chair Tom had taken had been the only empty one at the moment, for the lunch room was popular and well patronised and the time was the busiest period of the day. At his right a rather small, neatly dressed gentleman with black whiskers and a nervous manner was simultaneously draining the last drop in his milk glass and glancing at a gold watch which he had pulled from his pocket in a fidgety way. Tom had decided to have a plate of beef stew, price ten cents, a piece of apple pie, price five cents, and a glass of milk, price the same, when the nervous gentleman arose hurriedly and in passing tripped against one of Tom's extended feet.

[10]

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"Excuse me," said Tom. The man gave him an irritated glance, muttered something ungracious, and made for the door. Tom's gaze turned idly toward the chair beside him which the man had just vacated and fell on a small leather coin-purse. Evidently the gentleman had failed to return it to his trousers pocket or it had fallen out afterward. Tom seized it and jumped up. Fortunately he found when he reached the door that the loser, in spite of his apparent hurry, had paused on the curb. Tom touched him on the arm.

"I guess this is yours, ain't it?" he asked. "It was in your chair."

[12]

"Eh? Yes, of course it is. Must have dropped out of my pocket." He seemed quite put out about it and scowled at the purse before he put it away. "Most annoying." He shot a fleeting glance at the boy. "Much obliged to you; very kind." Then he plunged off the sidewalk, dodged a dray, and narrowly escaped the fender of a trolley car. Tom smiled as he returned to the lunch room.

"Bet you," he reflected, "he's one of the sort that's always in a hurry and never gets anywhere!"

His absence, as short as it had been, had lost him his seat, and he was obliged to penetrate to

the rear of the room and perch himself on a stool in front of one of the long counters. There, however, he feasted royally on beef stew, bread and butter, pie and milk, and managed to consume a full half-hour doing it. To be sure, he was still hungry when he had finished the last crumb, for he had had nothing since breakfast at seven o'clock and it was now well after one, and he had been on the go all the morning. But he felt a heap better and a lot more hopeful, and as he left the lunch room he was ready to believe his search for employment ended, that Mr. Cummings's reply would be favourable. A contented stomach is a great incentive to cheerful thoughts.

[13]

CHAPTER II

AND FINDS IT

[14]

The clock in a nearby steeple showed Tom that there still remained nearly ten minutes of waiting, and so he joined the northward-bound throng and idled along the street, pausing now and then to examine the contents of a store window. A jeweller's display held him for several minutes. He wondered whether he would ever be rich enough to possess one of the handsome gold watches so temptingly displayed on black velvet.

"They ain't—aren't—any thicker'n a buckwheat cake," marvelled Tom. "Don't seem as if there was room inside them for the wheels and things!" Just then he caught sight of himself in a mirror, took off his straw hat, and smoothed down a rebellious lock of red-brown hair. Then he replaced his hat, studied the result in the mirror, and nodded approvingly. A lady at the other side of the window smiled at the pantomime, and then, catching Tom's glance in the mirror, smiled at Tom. Tom flushed and hurried away.

"Guess she thought I was a fool," he muttered. "Standing there and primping like a girl!"

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The lady followed his flight with kindly amusement, realising sympathetically his embarrassment. And as she went on she wondered about him a little. The reddish-brown hair and the clear, honest blue eyes had been attractive, and, although the tanned and much-freckled face could not have been called handsome, yet there was something about it, perhaps the expression of boyish confidence and candour, that lingered in her memory. Neatly, if inexpensively dressed, his attire had told her that he was not an Amesville boy, while a lack of awkwardness, a general air of self-dependence, seemed to preclude the idea of his being from the country. The problem lasted her only for a short distance and then Tom and the ingenuous incident at the window passed from her mind. But she and Tom were destined to meet again, although neither suspected it.

It was exactly half-past one when Tom entered the hardware store once more. On the occasion of his first visit the store had been empty of customers, but now at least half a dozen persons were there, and Mr. Cummings was busy. Tom found a position out of the way and waited. Besides Mr. Cummings, there were two others behind the counters—a tall youth who, as he passed with a customer in tow, looked curiously at the boy, and a small man with dark whiskers who, at his present distance, had a strong likeness to the gentleman who had left his purse in the lunch room. It was several minutes before Mr. Cummings was at leisure, but finally, dropping the change into the glove of a lady who had purchased a tack hammer and three papers of upholstery tacks, he beckoned Tom to the counter.

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"Well," he said, "I spoke to Mr. Wright about you, son, but he didn't think we'd better hire anyone just yet. Maybe a month or so later, if you still want a job, we can take you on. Sorry I can't do anything now."

Tom's face fell. He had been so certain since lunch that his troubles were over that the disappointment was deeper than it should have been.

"I'm sorry too, sir," he said after a moment. "Well, I guess I'll go on. I—I'm much obliged to you. You don't happen to know of anyone who wants a boy, do you?"

"No, I don't believe I do," returned Mr. Cummings kindly. He kept step with Tom for a way as the latter moved toward the door. "You might try Miller and Tappen's, though. That's the dry-goods store up the street. They take new help on pretty often, I guess."

[17]

"I've been there," said Tom. "They said——"

"Joe, where have those three-inch brass hooks got to?" asked an impatient voice from the front of the store. "Funny we can't keep anything in place here!"

"Ought to be right in front of you," replied Mr. Cummings in patient tones. "Second shelf, Horace. No, *second*, I said. There! Got 'em?"

"Yes," replied the dark-whiskered man irritably. "I've got them at last!"

It *was* the gentleman of the coin-purse. Tom recognised him as he went past. The junior partner was displaying the three-inch hooks to a man in overalls and glanced up in his quick, nervous manner at the boy. Then he looked again, and:

"Who's that?" he asked sharply of Mr. Cummings.

"The boy I spoke to you about. Wants a job."

"Call him back!"

Tom was just at the doorway when Mr. Cummings's summons fell on his ear. He turned and retraced his steps. Mr. Cummings beckoned him to the counter where he had joined his partner. It was Mr. Wright who spoke, eying Tom searchingly. [18]

"Aren't you the boy who found my purse in the restaurant?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"Yes, sir."

"Mm." Mr. Wright poked a finger through the scattered hooks on the counter. "You wait a minute."

Tom drew aside. A glance at Mr. Cummings's face showed him that the senior partner was quite as much in the dark as he was as to Mr. Wright's conduct. But a minute later the customer in overalls went off with his hooks, and Mr. Wright, after returning the rest of them to a box and, as Tom saw with amusement, tossing it carelessly back to the wrong shelf, came from behind the counter.

"Mr. Cummings says you want employment," he said questioningly. "What can you do?"

"Anything, sir. I ain't afraid of work."

"Going to school, are you?"

"Yes, sir. I start Monday at high school."

"Do you know how to use a broom?" [19]

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Wright drew his fingers nervously through his black whiskers. "Do, eh? That's more than anybody else does around here." Evidently that was intended as a hit at the tall clerk who had drawn near. But the clerk only grinned. "Well——" Mr. Wright turned to his partner. "Take him on if you want to," he said. "He's honest, anyway. That's something. You talk to him."

He hurried away to the front of the store. Mr. Cummings, with a smile and a quizzical shrug of his shoulders, beckoned Tom to the railed-off office at the rear of the store. There he told Tom to sit down.

"What's this about a purse?" he inquired.

Tom told of the incident. Mr. Cummings seemed unduly impressed by it. "Now that was funny, wasn't it? A regular coincidence, eh? Blessed if it don't look to me as if luck had fixed everything up for you, son. Well, now I'll tell you what we're willing to do and you can say whether you want to do it. Your uncle owes this firm sixty-four dollars and a half. We'll call it an even sixty. Now, we'll take you on here to work at two and a half a week. Two of that goes to you and fifty cents of it comes to us until we've squared ourselves for that sixty dollars. That satisfactory to you?" [20]

Tom considered a moment. Then, "Yes, sir, I think so," he replied a little doubtfully.

"Well, if I were you, I'd talk to my uncle; tell him our offer and see if he wouldn't be willing to make up the half-dollar to you. You're paying his bill, you know."

"Maybe he would." But there was little conviction in Tom's tone. "Anyway, if he didn't, it wouldn't matter, I guess. It would be all right if I could find a room for two dollars. I looked at one this morning, but the lady wanted two dollars and a half for it. Maybe I could find another, though."

"I think you ought to," said Mr. Cummings. "Try around Locust Street, near the depot. Well, there's our offer, son, anyway. If you want to, you can have a talk with your uncle before you decide."

"No, sir, thanks, I'll—I'll come, anyway."

"All right. If you get on and learn the business, after a while we'll give you more money. Mind you, though, you'll have to show up here at seven-thirty, open up the store, and sweep and dust. And we'll expect you back after school to stay until we close at six. On Saturdays we stay open until nine. And just before Christmas we keep open every evening. Let's see; you said you wanted to get off early Saturday evenings, didn't you?" [21]

"I thought I'd like to spend Sundays at home, sir."

"That would be all right usually, I guess. Around Christmas time we might want you to stay late on Saturdays, but other times I guess you could get off by eight or whenever your train goes. When do you want to start?"

"I was thinking I'd start Monday afternoon, sir. I'm going home to-day and coming back Monday morning, in time for school. Would that be all right?"

"Yes, that'll do. To-day's Thursday, isn't it? All right, son. We'll look for you Monday afternoon. You do your work right and I guess you'll find us easy to get along with." Mr. Cummings hesitated. "I might as well tell you, though, that—er—my partner is a little quick-tempered at times. It's just his way. He's terribly nervous. After you get used to him, you won't mind it." [22]

"Yes, sir."

"That's all then, I guess. By the way, what did you tell me your name was?"

"Thomas Pollock, sir."

"Miss Miller, just make a note of this, please. Thomas Pollock enters our employ Monday. Wages, two and a half a week. Enter him on the pay-roll. Thank you. By the way, son, you'd better have a pair of overalls here to slip on. There'll be dirty jobs, I guess, and there's no use spoiling your clothes. Good day."

It was not yet two o'clock when Tom passed out of Cummings and Wright's and his train did not leave until after four. That gave him a good two hours in which to seek a room within the limit of the two dollars which he was to actually receive. He had scant expectation of being able to persuade Uncle Israel to make good that fifty cents a week to him. Israel Bowles was considered a hard man around Derry, and, it seemed, his reputation had even spread to the city. Tom didn't for a moment doubt that Uncle Israel really did honestly owe that sixty-odd dollars to the hardware house. Uncle Israel, however, probably had what seemed to him a perfectly legitimate reason for not paying it. And, as the indebtedness had remained for six years, Tom didn't believe that Uncle Israel would agree to paying it off through him. Still, it would do no harm to ask, he told himself as he set off down Main Street. [23]

Tom's mother had died when he was a baby, and his father when he was nine years old. They had lived in Plaistow, a small Ohio town about a hundred miles from Derry. Before Tom, who was the only child, had been born his parents had had several homes, as he had learned from Uncle Israel. Uncle Israel called Tom's father a "ne'er-do-well" and a "gallivanter." Tom for a long time didn't know what a "gallivanter" was, but he always resented the term as applied to his father. His parents, like Uncle Israel, who was his mother's brother, had come originally from New Hampshire. When Tom's father died, leaving little in the way of earthly goods, Uncle Israel had promptly claimed the boy and taken him to Derry. On the whole, Uncle Israel had been kind to Tom. The lad had had to work hard during the six years on the farm, had had to rise early and, often enough, go late to bed, since his schooling had been more or less intermittent, and it had been only by studying in the evenings that he had been able to keep up with his class in the little country schoolhouse. Tom couldn't doubt that Uncle Israel was fond of him, even if displays of affection had been few. And Tom was honestly fond of Uncle Israel. He knew better than perhaps anyone else that, hard as his uncle seemed, there were some soft places, after all. But Tom didn't deceive himself with false hopes about the fifty cents a week! [24]

Main Street crossed the railroad tracks between the station and the freight houses. Parallel to the railroad ran Locust Street, lined on one side with small stores and lodging-houses affected by railroad employes. It was not an attractive part of the town, and the smoke from the engines and the dust raised by the wagons and drays that passed on their way to the freight houses made the fronts of the cheap, unlovely buildings dingy and dirty. But Tom knew he had no right to expect a great deal for two dollars and so began his search philosophically. There were plenty of rooms for rent in those three blocks, but most of them, after his own neat and clean little bedroom at the farm, turned him away in disgust. But at length he found what seemed to answer his purpose. It was a back room in a lodging-house even smaller and meaner-looking than usual, but it was clean and, within its limits, attractive. And the price was better than he had dared hope for. He could have it, said the stout Irishwoman who pantingly conducted him up the flight of steep, uncarpeted stairs, for a dollar and seventy-five cents a week, payable in advance. From the one small window there was a not unattractive view of a diminutive back-yard, which held a prosperous-looking elm tree, and the rear of a livery stable which, being only one story in height, allowed him to look over its flat tar-and-gravel roof to the more distant roofs and spires and trees of Amesville. Tom took the room, paid down fifty cents as earnest money, and agreed to pay the balance Monday morning. His landlady's name, as she told him on the way downstairs, was Cleary, and her husband worked in the roundhouse. She referred to him as a "hostler," but Tom didn't see how a hostler could be employed about engines. He didn't question her statement, however. She seemed a good-hearted, respectable woman. She had six other lodgers, she informed him, "all illigint tinants," and proceeded to supply him with the life history of each. Two small children crept bashfully through the door of a back room and stared unblinkingly at Tom until their mother discovered their presence and sent them scurrying out of sight. "Me two youngest," she explained proudly. "I've three more. One do be working for Miller and Tappen, drives a delivery cart, he does, and the next two do be in school. They're good kiddies, the whole lot of 'em." [25]

Tom finally dragged himself away and crossed over to the station to kill time until his train left, on the whole very well satisfied with the results of his day's industry. [26]

CHAPTER III

UNCLE ISRAEL SAYS "NO"

Derry lay twenty-two miles to the west of Amesville and it required almost an hour for the branch line train to reach the little settlement. Tom descended from the car amidst the clatter of empty milk-cans being put off on the platform of the small station. Uncle Israel Bowles's farm lay nearly a mile away, and Tom, whose feet were sore from the unaccustomed tramping of city pavements, looked about for a lift. But of the two buggies and one farm wagon in sight none was bound his way, and so he crossed to the dusty road that led northward and set out through the warm, still end of a September day. There was no hurry and so he went slowly, limping a little [27]

now and then, and thinking busily of the new life to begin on Monday. He wondered whether he would get on satisfactorily with Cummings and Wright, whether the lessons at high school would prove terribly hard, whether he would find any friends amongst the boys there. And finally, with an uneasy sensation, he wondered how long the small amount of money he had saved up during the past two years would last him in Amesville. What experience he had had of city prices for food alarmed him when he thought of satisfying that very healthy appetite of his! Well, he would just have to do the best he could, and if doing the best he could meant going hungry sometimes he'd go hungry! At all events, that money had to last him until next summer, when, either through some more advantageous arrangement with Cummings and Wright or by hiring himself again to one of the neighbouring farmers, he could once more put himself in funds. These reflections and resolves brought him in sight of the farm, and the next moment the joyful barking of Star, his collie dog, announced his advent. Star came leaping and bounding through the gate and down the road to meet him.

[28]

"Hello, old chap!" said Tom, patting the dog's head. "I guess I'm going to miss you more'n anything or anybody when I go away. I wish I could take you with me. I just do. But I guess you'd pretty near starve to death over there to Amesville. There wouldn't be any buttermilk, Star, and there wouldn't be any corn-bread, either, I guess. Well, I'll be back on Saturdays to see you, anyway. What you been doing all day? Did you miss me?"

[29]

Star replied dog-fashion that he had missed his master very much, and, by licking his hand and doing his best to lick his face as well, accorded him a royal welcome home. Aunt Patty—she was no real relation, but Tom had always called her aunt—was setting the table for supper as he went in. She was a small, wrinkled little old woman, with a sharp tongue and a warm heart, and had kept house for Uncle Israel for nearly twenty years. She paused with a salt-cellar in each hand and viewed Tom and Star critically.

"Back again, be you?" she asked in her sharp, thin voice. "An' that pesky dog-critter's back again, too, ain't he? If I've put him out o' here once to-day, I've put him out forty times! Gettin' the place all upsot an' bringin' in dirt! Well, what you find out this time?"

"Lots, Aunt Patty," answered Tom cheerfully. "Star, you lie down like a good dog or Aunt Patty won't love you any more."

Aunt Patty sniffed. "Well, can't you tell a body anything?" she asked. "You got most as close a tongue as your uncle, you have!"

[30]

"I've got a job, Aunt Patty. Cummings and Wright, the hardware firm. Two and a half a week. How's that?"

"'Tain't much for a big strong boy like you to earn, I'd say."

"But I can only be there before and after school. I think two and a half's pretty good wages, considering. And I found a room for a dollar and seventy-five cents. So that leaves me a quarter to the good, you see."

"Leaves you seventy-five cents, don't it? Where's all your 'rithmetic?"

"Ye-es, I meant seventy-five," responded Tom slowly. "Where's uncle?"

"Round somewheres. Land sakes, don't expect me to keep track of him, do you? Likely he's in the cow-shed. John ain't brought in the milk yet."

"I guess I'd ought to go out and help," mused Tom. "Only if I do I'll get this suit dirty, maybe."

"You keep away from the barn in them clothes, Tom Pollock. I guess there ain't any more work than two able-bodied men can do. Supper's most ready, anyhow. Ain't you hungry?"

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"I guess so," Tom answered uncertainly. "I'll go up and wash my hands."

When Tom returned a few minutes later, Uncle Israel and John Green, the hired man, had come in, and Aunt Patty summoned them to supper. Uncle Israel folded his big, bony hands on the edge of the red cloth, bent his head, and said grace in his rumbling voice. Then he turned his sharp, cold-blue eyes on Tom.

"What all'd you do to-day, Tom?" he asked.

Tom recounted the day's adventures in detail, neglecting, however, to explain the terms of Cummings and Wright's offer. Uncle Israel listened attentively, eating steadily all the time as though taking food was a duty he owed rather than a pleasure. He was a tall man just past fifty years of age—Tom already showed promise of being like him as far as height was concerned—with a large, strongly-built frame on which he carried little flesh. He was long of arm and leg and neck, and his face held two prominent features—the large straight nose and the deeply set eyes which had the frosty glitter of blue ice. His face, tanned and weathered, was clean-shaven except at the chin, where a small tuft of grizzled beard wagged in time to the working of his strong jaws. The face was rather a handsome one, on the whole, handsome in a hard and rugged fashion that somehow reminded one of the granite hills of his native state. He said little during Tom's recital, or afterward. A grunt or a brusque question now and then was about the sum of his contribution to conversation.

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After supper, when Aunt Patty was rattling the pans and dishes at the kitchen sink and John Green had gone out to the steps to smoke his pipe, Tom took his courage in hand and told his uncle about the arrangement to which he had agreed with Mr. Cummings. Uncle Israel heard him through in silence, frowning the while. "And so," concluded Tom, "I thought maybe you'd be willing to make up the fifty cents to me, sir. Would you?"

"No."

"You mean you don't want I should pay the bill to them that way?"

"You tell Cummings that that pump's here and he can come and get it any time he wants to. I told him that 'most six years ago, I guess. It wan't no good. It broke down the second time I hitched it up to the mill. I told him then I didn't intend to pay good money for it. He said I was to bring it in and he'd take it up with the factory. I said: 'You come and fetch it. I've lugged it one way. Now it's your turn.' If you hand him over fifty cents a week out of your wages, that's your affair. It's got nothing to do with me."

Tom considered awhile. Finally, "Where is that pump, Uncle?" he asked.

"Under the barn. Or it was last time I seen it. Maybe it's rusted to pieces by now. I don't know, nor I don't care."

"Well, sir, if I don't do like he says, he won't take me to work. And it seems to me it's better to get two dollars than nothing. Course I might find a job somewhere else, but"—and Tom sighed—"I went to 'most fifty places, I guess. Is—is the pump worth anything at all, sir?"

Mr. Bowles shrugged his shoulders. "Might be worth a few dollars for old iron."

"Then if I pay for it may I have it?"

"What for?"

"Just to see if I can sell it and make some money on it. I guess I've got to pay for it, sir, and if you don't want it——"

"It ain't mine to give," said his uncle. "If Cummings wants to sell it to you, all right. You can tell him from me, though, that there's a little matter of six dollars due me for storing it all this time." And Uncle Israel's eyes twinkled and the corners of his mouth moved with the nearest thing to a smile that he was ever guilty of.

"Then I'd have to pay that, too, before I could have it?" asked Tom.

"You tell him that," responded Uncle Israel. Then he took up a newspaper, settled his spectacles on the bridge of his big nose, and edged his chair to the light. The subject was closed. Tom recognised the fact and, stifling a sigh, found his Latin book and took himself off to study. Monday loomed up startingly near.

CHAPTER IV

AT CUMMINGS AND WRIGHT'S

Amesville was a city of some twenty-five thousand population, and on a certain Monday in late September of the year 1911 it increased its population, to our certain knowledge, by one. That one was Mr. Thomas Pollock, who stepped off the milk train at a quarter-past six and staggered across the dust-strewn road to Mrs. Cleary's lodging-house, burdened with a valise whose bulging sides would certainly have strained the lock to the breaking point without the straps that encircled them. He spent the better part of an hour in unpacking and distributing his possessions. He was not over-supplied with clothes, which, in view of the scanty accommodations provided for such things, was fortunate; but it nevertheless took him quite a while to arrange the contents of the big valise to his satisfaction. There was a small table in one corner of the room and a bureau near the window. A washstand, a single iron bed, and a straight-backed chair completed the furnishings, if we except a very thin and gaudy carpet which tried but failed to quite cover the uneven floor. Tom stowed his clothes neatly in the bureau drawers—there was no closet, but a board holding four hooks was nailed to the inner side of the door—put his extra pair of shoes under the table, and arranged a few treasures on table and bureau. These included a faded photograph of his father—he had never had one of his mother,—one of Aunt Patty taken at the State Fair some ten years ago, and one of Star. Star's likeness had been made by a travelling photographer to whom Tom had paid the sum of fifty cents. But it was a good picture and worth the money. If only Star had kept his tail still no possible fault could have been found with it. The treasures also included a pair of skates, an old-fashioned travelling portfolio which had belonged to his father and which held an ink-well and compartments for paper, envelopes, pens, holders, stamps, and a blotter. Tom was very fond of that portfolio and dreamed of some day making a real journey and pictured himself sitting in a Pullman car or on the deck of a steamer with it on his knee writing long letters to Uncle Israel and Aunt Patty. Not to Star, of course, for Star would be right there with him! There were other things, too; a much battered baseball which showed the imprints of a dog's teeth, a coloured picture showing the landing of Columbus, a sweet-grass basket, the Christmas gift of Aunt Patty, holding several disfigured pennies, a postage stamp lacking mucilage, some buttons, a stone arrow-head which Tom had himself unearthed on the farm, and a soiled piece of slippery-elm. There was also a little shiny red-lacquered box with a spray of bamboo in gilt on the cover which held Tom's jewelry. This box, however, had been safely stowed under a pile of underwear in the second bureau drawer and contained a tiny plain gold ring which was supposed to have been his mother's wedding ring, although Tom had absolutely no proof of that, a pair of silver cuff-links, a silver scarf-pin set with an imitation ruby, and three gold-plated shirt studs.

At half-past seven Tom locked his room door, dropped the key proudly in his pocket, and went in search of breakfast. Aunt Patty had provided him with coffee and doughnuts at twenty minutes to five that morning, but he felt the need of something more lasting. It was not hard to find an eating place, for there were three small and rather dirty restaurants on his own street. In the hope of finding cheap prices he invaded one of them and ordered corned-beef hash, a boiled egg, and a glass of milk. The price was not exorbitant, but the hash was greasy and tasteless, the egg was far from fresh, and the milk was a base libel on that noble animal, the cow! But the viands served and Tom consoled himself with the thought that he had paid ten cents less than a similar repast would have cost him on Main Street. There remained a whole half-hour before school began and he set out to see the town. Thus far he had discovered only the business portion of it. Now he turned his steps toward the residential streets and loitered along past prosperous-looking houses which, to Tom at least, might well have been the abodes of so many multi-millionaires. Later, when he chanced upon the abodes of the city's really wealthy residents, he discovered his mistake. But now he mentally peopled the houses with Vanderbilts and Goulds and Rockefellers and unenviably admired the smooth green lawns and vivid flower borders and resplendent doorways and felt very grateful that he was to live in a place where there were so many beautiful things.

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Then, at last, the high-school building loomed up ahead, set squarely in its open plot of lawn and gravelled walks, a handsome great structure of mottled brick and sandstone trimmings. Already the boys' entrance was well sprinkled with youths, while more were approaching the building from all directions. Tom, feeling a little shy, edged his way up the broad steps and into the building. But none of the others took special notice of him and he reached the Principal's office and joined a line already waiting. The big hallway with its plaster statuary and tiled floor was quite impressive as, also, were the classrooms which he glimpsed. He couldn't help comparing it all with the little one-room frame schoolhouse at Derry! And he was more than a little anxious and nervous as he awaited his turn.

But many things are far worse in anticipation than in realisation, and Tom's first day at high school passed smoothly and without misadventure. He was assigned to a room and a desk, given a list of books and supplies to provide himself with, marched with many others up two flights of broad stairs and went through a calisthenic drill, studied awhile, and was finally released for the day, there being but the one session.

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With a light heart he set out for a stationery store and purchased tablets, blank-books, pencils, erasers, and all the other articles required. The school books he could rent, which meant a big saving to his pocket. He dined well, if inexpensively, and at two o'clock made his way to Cummings and Wright's. Neither of the partners was in, and it fell to the lot of Mr. Joseph Gillig to receive him. Joe Gillig was the single clerk in the employ; Miss Miller, who lived behind a glass partition, was a cashier and bookkeeper, which, as Tom learned later, is quite different from being a clerk. Joe was about twenty years of age, tall, thin, with a long neck in which his Adam's apple did marvellous things as he talked. Joe had a good-natured, homely countenance lighted by a pair of nice, if somewhat sleepy, brown eyes and marred by an incipient moustache which, to Joe's distress, was coming out red.

"They didn't look for you till four," he said in greeting. "They're both out now. Want to look over the place? What you got in the bundle?"

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"Overalls," replied Tom. "Mr. Cummings said I'd better bring a pair."

"Right-o! Wait till I wait on that guy and I'll show you over the shop."

The "guy" was hard to suit in the matter of a rip-saw and Tom had several minutes to wait. The hardware store was rather narrow, but made up for that by being interminably deep. Counters ran along each side, set here and there with showcases. A row of supporting pillars of iron stretched lengthwise of the store in the middle and about them were clustered such articles of trade as wheelbarrows, garden hose, fire extinguishers, and step-ladders, for Cummings and Wright didn't confine themselves to the ordinary stock of hardware. At the rear of the store a door led to an alley, and there was a window on each side of the doorway. The office was a railed-off enclosure in one corner here, while Miss Gertrude Miller was enshrined in a box-like structure of imitation mahogany and glass, into which the belts of the cash carriers ran and where she made change while presiding over the firm's books. Tom was duly presented to Miss Miller by Joe and rather shyly shook hands with her. She had a good deal of red-brown hair and a pair of soft grey eyes and was undeniably pretty, a fact which added to Tom's embarrassment, since pretty young ladies were things he had had little to do with. He was glad when Joe, explaining everything as he went along, led the way down the flight of dark stairs on the other side and landed him in a cellar which occupied the entire space under the store. Here there was a packing room at the rear, coal bins, and a heater whose future conduct, Tom gathered, would be under his supervision. The rest of the cellar held stock too heavy or bulky to keep above, except that at the far end, partly under the sidewalk, a good-sized room was partitioned off. Here Cummings and Wright conducted a plumbing, steam-fitting, and tinsmithing business. There was a separate entrance from outside, by means of a flight of iron steps, and the department was presided over by a small, wiry man named Jim Hobb. He had very black hair and the palest blue eyes Tom had ever seen. When Joe introduced them, Jim stopped to wipe his hands carefully on a bunch of very dirty waste before offering it to Tom. There was another man down there and a grinning youth of about Tom's age, whose face was streaked and plastered with dirt and grease. His name was Petey. Tom never heard the rest of it. And the other man's name was Connors.

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A bell in the stock room rang shrilly and Joe Gillig hurried back upstairs, explaining to Tom that

the signal meant that a customer had come in. In this case, however, Joe was mistaken, for it was Mr. Wright who had summoned him.

"Why aren't you up here attending to things?" he demanded of Joe. "Anyone might come in and walk off with half the stock for all you'd ever know!" Then, seeing Tom, he stared doubtfully a moment and finally grunted as recognition came. "So you've turned up, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Tom Pollock, sir."

"Colic?"

"No, sir, Pollock."

"Well, what are you doing?"

"Nothing yet, sir. I just got here and Mister—he was showing me around."

"Better get to work then. Can't afford to pay wages to idlers."

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"Yes, sir. What shall I do?"

"Do? Do?" Mr. Wright got quite peevish at the question. "Do anything! Find something to do! That's what you're here for, isn't it? Seems to me there's plenty to do here. You don't see me standing around *looking* for work, do you?"

Tom looked doubtfully at Joe. Joe gravely winked across a counter. Mr. Wright, fuming to himself, hurried back to the office.

"What shall I do?" asked Tom.

"Oh, just get behind a counter and make believe you're busy. He never knows the difference. Tell you what, though, Tom. You might take the stuff out of the tool case down there and clean it out. You'll find dust-brush and cloths downstairs behind the packing-room door. Be careful not to get things mixed up. Better lay everything on top of the case. I'll show you when you come up."

Mr. Cummings entered while Tom was emptying the showcase and stopped to shake hands with him. "Got you at work, have they?" he asked. "That's right. Those cases need cleaning." Presently, having conversed for a few moments with his partner, he was back again. "Did you speak to your uncle, son?" he inquired.

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"Yes, sir. He—he wasn't willing to have me pay his bill like that. But of course I'm going to do it. He says that pump isn't his; says it belongs to you and that you owe him for storing it."

"What!" Mr. Cummings stared and then burst into a laugh. "Well, of all the tight-fisted old rascals! Suppose I oughtn't to say that before you, though," he added apologetically. Tom maintained a composed silence. "Wants me to pay him storage, does he? By George, he certainly has plenty of cheek!"

"He says he lugged the pump out there, and it's your place to bring it back, sir. He says he notified you about it when he found it wouldn't work right."

"Maybe he did," responded Mr. Cummings grimly. "But we've got more to do than run around the country after broken machinery."

"I was wondering, sir," said Tom, "if after I've paid that bill I couldn't have the pump."



"I was wondering, sir," said Tom, "if after I've paid that bill I couldn't have the pump"

"Well, that's for your uncle to say, isn't it?"

"He says it belongs to you, sir."

"I see. Well, when that bill's paid, son, we'll give you a clear title to the pump as far as we're concerned. What did you think of doing with it?"

"Just—just trying to sell it, sir. It ought to be worth something as junk, I should think."

"Hm, I suppose so. You might be able to sell it for twenty dollars or so if it isn't badly out of shape. Where's he keeping it?"

"It's under the barn. I had a look at it yesterday. It seems all right. I mean it isn't rusted none. It's all covered up."

"Did your uncle say what the matter with it was?"

"N-no, sir. He said it wouldn't work."

"Probably didn't know how to use it. I dare say it could be fixed up in a jiffy. If you get it and want to sell it, you let me know. Maybe I can find someone to take it off your hands. Better put a couple of those expansion bits back on the shelf. No use showing more than one of them."

The store was closed at six and Tom, slipping off his blue overalls, went in search of supper. Afterward he sought his room and sat up until half-past nine studying his lessons for the morrow. When at last he piled into bed, he lay for some time very wide-awake with the unaccustomed screech and rush of passing trains and the dim hum of the city in his ears. Through the open window, behind the branches of the elm and above the distant house-tops, a half-moon was sailing. Tom, a trifle lonesome, wondered if Uncle Israel and Aunt Patty were missing him a little. He knew Star was. He wished he had Star with him here. He wished—

Whatever else he wished was in dreams.

CHAPTER V

TOM LOOKS AT HIS HAIR

By the end of the week Tom had settled down into his new life. In the mornings he was up at half-past six and by seven-thirty had dressed, breakfasted, and reached the store. There, at first under the superintendence of Joe Gillig and later quite by himself, he swept the store from front to back, dusted off cases and shelves, and emptied waste-baskets. At first Joe helped him, but gradually he was left to attend to this work alone. By hurrying he was just able to finish it by twenty-five minutes past eight. Then he raced across the three blocks to the high school and

arrived there usually as the gong rang. At half-past twelve there was a half-hour recess for lunch. The second day at school Tom discovered that there was a lunch room in the basement and that he could buy hot soup, sandwiches, coffee, milk, cake, and fruit at much cheaper prices than at the outside restaurants. After a day or two he got into the habit of eating a rather hearty breakfast in the cleanest of the little restaurants on Locust Street, satisfying his appetite at noon with a bowl of soup, a sandwich, and a glass of milk, and then dining after the store had closed. At three o'clock school was over and he was free to return to the store.

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There was always plenty to do there, as Mr. Wright had intimated, and after that first day Tom didn't have to hunt very hard for work. He washed windows, ran errands, packed orders in big cases down in the packing room, and learned to use marking-pot and brush with some dexterity, replaced goods on the shelves after Mr. Wright had served a customer—for the junior partner never was known to put goods back into place again,—polished the brass railings outside the windows and the brass on the door, and, in short, made himself generally useful. Perhaps Joe Gillig imposed on him a little; Tom suspected as much; but Joe was always kind and patient with him and Tom liked him. Later, when the weather grew cold, Tom was put in charge of the hot-water heater in the basement, and he had to shovel coal and ashes and sift out cinders and trundle ash-barrels to the elevator and roll them to the edge of the sidewalk above. It was heavy work, a whole lot of it, and if Tom had not been used to heavy work he could hardly have got through with it. As it was, however, the only effect it had on him was to harden and develop his muscles and increase a naturally healthy appetite.

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It was that appetite that worried Tom more than anything those days. The second week in Amesville he conceived the idea of keeping account of his expenditures, and the result was disheartening. The best he could do was sixty-five cents a day, and that came to nearly four dollars a week. Add to that his fare to and from Derry and the total reached to almost five dollars a week! Tom's heart sank. At such a rate the money he had saved would be gone some time in February! For several days after that he nearly starved himself trying to economise and got so thin and peaked-looking that even Mr. Cummings noticed it.

It was Mrs. Cleary who finally solved his problem after a fashion. There was a friend of hers, she informed him one evening, a Mrs. Burns and a fine lady entirely, who had started to take table boarders in the next street. Mrs. Cleary thought maybe Tom would like to test Mrs. Burns's hospitality. Tom went around there the next morning and arranged for breakfasts and suppers. In view of the fact that he would be away on Sundays, Mrs. Burns bargained to take him for two dollars and a half a week. As his lunches at school seldom cost him more than fifteen cents—and sometimes only ten—he stood to save at least fifty cents weekly by this arrangement. And Mrs. Burns set a very good table, as it proved. There were no dainties, but whatever she put before her boarders was substantial and well-cooked. Her guests were mostly workers around the railroad, men with big, honest appetites and table manners that at first shocked Tom a good deal. After he got to know several of the men rather well, he was quite willing to forgive them their lack of niceties.

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Every Saturday evening Tom returned to Derry. Usually either Uncle Israel or John Green drove to the station and met him. Then there was a supper that more than made up for any lack during the week. Aunt Patty made a special occasion of that weekly home-coming and cooked the things Tom best liked. Uncle Israel always greeted him as if they had parted at dinner time, but during the evening he always had to hear what had happened during the week.

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However, if Uncle Israel's welcome seemed lacking in warmth, there was no fault to be found with Star's, unless it was the fault of over-enthusiasm. Poor Star was having lonely times those days. John Green, himself a rather lonely, taciturn man, confided to Tom on his second visit home that it just made his heart ache to see how that there Star dog moped aroun'! Well, those end-of-the-week visits to the farm were pretty fine, and during the first month at least saved Tom from many a fit of discouragement and homesickness. After a month they became less imperative, for by that time he had made friends and, although he had but little time in which to cultivate them, the knowledge of them helped a good deal. He was rather surprised, in fact, to discover how many persons he knew in Amesville by the time October had reached its end. There was Joe Gillig, of course, who, in consideration of the disparity in the ages of the two boys, was quite chummy with Tom and had twice taken him to supper at the little cottage in Stuart's Addition, where Joe lived with an invalid mother and an unmarried sister some five years his senior. They were very nice folks, Tom thought, and the only thing that marred the occasions of his visits was the overbearing and almost rude attitude of Joe toward the women. Tom, though, understood dimly that Joe really intended neither discourtesy nor unkindness; that having been the head of the little establishment for ten years or so was responsible for the rather harsh authority he assumed. And then, too, both Mrs. Gillig and Mary did their utmost to spoil Joe, accepting his dictates with meek admiration.

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And then there was Mrs. Cleary, his landlady, who mothered him in her good-hearted Irish way, and Dan, her husband, a big, raw-boned man with a voice like a fog-horn and a laugh like a young tornado. Frequently when Tom came home after supper he stopped downstairs and visited for a little while with the Clearys. The eldest son, who drove a delivery wagon for Miller and Tappen, was seldom there, but he made friends with the other children and listened to Dan Cleary's stories of happenings in the railroad yard and roundhouse. It was a little bit like home, and when he went on upstairs to his own tiny room he felt less lonesome. Then, too, he made the acquaintance of two or three of the boarders at Mrs. Burns's—rough, hard-working men with unlovely ways and kind hearts. It was about this time that Tom made a discovery that helped him a good deal in later years, which was that folks are very much alike under the skin whether they

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ride in carriages or drive spikes into railway ties.

At school Tom knew a dozen boys well enough to speak to, but the fact that he had no time to join them in their after-school or holiday pursuits and pleasures kept him from forming any close friendships. When the others hurried away to the athletic field to play football or watch it, Tom plodded across to Cummings and Wright's. But he followed closely and patriotically the fortunes of the Amesville High eleven, listened avidly to the chat of the fellows at school, and read the accounts of the contests with rival teams in the morning paper. Never having seen a football game, Tom would have liked mighty well to go out and look on some afternoon, but the only glimpse of football he got was one day when he was despatched by street car to deliver a forgotten tool to Steve Connors, who was doing a job of plumbing in a house on the north of town. The trolley car left him two blocks from his destination, and when he saw a crowd of boys in an open field and heard the shouting he correctly surmised that he had happened on the athletic field and the high school team in action. He delivered the tool to Connors and then, on his way back, joined the throng of boys and girls on the side lines and watched interestedly for as long as his conscience would let him. After ten minutes he tore himself reluctantly away, very much wishing himself a gentleman of leisure!

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And yet he did make a friend finally, and it happened in this way. After Tom had been with Cummings and Wright a month or so, he was permitted to wait on customers occasionally when the others were busy. Joe had initiated him into the mysteries of the cost marks and he had eventually got so that he could translate the puzzling letters that adorned every article into numerals and knew at a glance that, for instance "F O Z" meant that the article had cost \$1.37 and that the following "G L Y" intimated that it was to be sold for \$1.75. As time passed Tom became more and more a member of the selling force and speedily reached a degree of efficiency that made it no longer necessary for him to consult Joe Gillig or one of the partners before disposing of goods. November had passed, Tom had eaten his Thanksgiving dinner at the farm, the high school football team had finished a not too glorious season, and now, in the first week of December, a hard freeze had come and at school the fellows were eagerly talking skating and hockey. One afternoon, just as it was getting dark in the store, Joe called to Tom, who was marking a case in the packing room.

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"Tom, come up and wait on a customer, will you?" shouted Joe down the stairway. Mr. Cummings, Mr. Wright, and Joe were all busy when Tom emerged from the basement, and Joe nodded toward the front of the store. "See what that lady wants, Tom," he said. "And as you come by switch on the lights, will you?"

The lady was standing by a showcase in which Joe had just finished arranging a display of skates. She was quietly dressed, but Tom knew that such clothes cost a deal of money. She smiled in a friendly way at the boy as he leaned inquiringly across the counter, copying Joe's best manner, and Tom decided then and there that she must be awfully nice and jolly. She had laid a big black muff on the case and now she moved it aside that she might see better what lay beneath. Then she raised her glance to Tom again as he asked, "Is there something I can show you, ma'am?"

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"I want a pair——" she began. Then her smile deepened and Tom thought afterward that she had even laughed a tiny bit. At all events, her subsequent remark was strangely at variance with her start, for, her eyes twinkling, she asked amazingly, "Does your hair still bother you?"

"Ma'am!" ejaculated Tom, thinking he must have misunderstood.

This time she really did laugh—a short, rippling little murmur of a laugh—as she answered: "I asked if your hair still bothered you. But it was rather an impertinent question, perhaps, so I won't demand an answer." She ended demurely, apologetically, and seemed waiting for Tom to say something. He had an uncomfortable but not altogether unpleasant sensation of being made fun of.

"I—I guess I don't just understand you," he stammered.

"Never mind," she replied sweetly. "It's of no consequence. I want to get a pair of skates, please. For a boy," she added.

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"Yes'm. All-clamp?"

"Goodness, are there different kinds?" she asked in a pretty dismay.

"Yes'm, we have four or five kinds and they sell all the way from seventy-five cents to six dollars. I guess, though, you want a pair of half-clamp at about three dollars. Like these." Tom opened the case and laid a pair of skates on the counter alongside. The lady looked at them doubtfully, held one up, and then thoughtfully ran it along the counter, shaking her head.

"I think I'll have to leave it to you," she said, "for I know very little about skates, especially boys' skates. You see, I want them for my boy. They were to be a Christmas present, but he's been ill at home for two weeks now and the doctor has promised him he can get out of the house in a few days and he's very eager to go skating. Of course he can't, just right away, because he hurt his shoulder rather badly playing football and I suppose skating wouldn't be good for it. But it seemed too bad to make him wait nearly a month for skates when the skating has already begun. Don't you think so?"

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"Yes'm," said Tom heartily.

"That's what I thought. So his father and I decided he should have the skates now. I dare say there'll be plenty of other things he will want by Christmas," she added smilingly. "Oh, I almost

forgot. He wanted hockey skates. Are these hockey skates?"

"No'm; at least, they ain't—aren't called hockey skates. We have regular hockey skates here; two kinds. They cost more, though. These are five dollars and a quarter and these are six."

"But they're quite different, aren't they?" she said perplexedly.

"Yes'm. These they call tubular."

"Which are the best?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I never played hockey."

"Really? Don't you skate, either?"

"Yes'm, but I don't have much time. I go to school from half-past eight to three and other times I work here."

"High school, do you mean?"

"Yes'm."

"Then perhaps you know my boy?" she said eagerly.

"No'm, I know him by sight, that's all. It was too bad his getting hurt in that game."

"Wasn't it? You see, it kept him out of the big game and he was quite heart-broken about it. Of course his father and I aren't very happy when he's playing, but Mr. Morris insists that it's a fine thing for him, and Sidney himself loves it."

"I—I hope he's getting on all right, ma'am," said Tom.

"Oh, yes, thank you, he's doing very well. I wish you knew him. He's rather a nice boy——"

"Yes'm, he's awfully popular at school."

"And," continued Mrs. Morris smilingly, "you seem a very nice boy, too. I think you ought to know each other."

Tom blushed a little. "Yes'm; I mean thank you," he murmured.

Mrs. Morris laughed softly again. Tom liked that laugh of hers immensely, it was so sort of happy and kind and friendly. "Well," she said, "we haven't decided about the skates, have we? Perhaps the best thing to do is to have you send both pairs around and let Sidney take his choice. Could you send them this evening?"

"I—I'm afraid not," answered Tom, glancing at the clock and knowing that the last delivery had left the store a half-hour ago.

Mrs. Morris's face fell. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I did want him to have them to-night. He's been so—so unhappy and grumpy to-day, you see. But perhaps I could take them myself if you did them up."

"They'd be pretty heavy," demurred Tom. "If—if you'll let me, I'll bring them myself after I get through."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of troubling you! We live quite a distance. I dare say to-morrow will do just as well."

"I wouldn't mind doing it a bit," said Tom eagerly. "I—I'd be glad to!"

"Really? That's very kind of you. If you're quite certain it won't be too much trouble, I'd love to have you. Besides, I want you to know my boy, and it will do him good to have someone of his own sort to talk to for a little while."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of going in!" declared Tom in a mild panic.

"But you really must! I want you to. It's a part of the bargain." She smiled, and Tom knew right there and then that if Mrs. Morris wanted the moon she had only to smile at him to set him off after it! "You won't fail to come, will you? Sidney would be so disappointed if you should. And Sidney's mother, too," she added as she took up her muff and nodded charmingly. Then, pausing on her way to the door, she turned a very serious face toward Tom. He was not near enough to see the mischievous mockery in her brown eyes. "If you don't come," she said, "I shall know that it's your troublesome hair!"

"Now, what do you suppose she meant by that?" demanded Tom of no one in particular, unless it was Alexander the Greater, who was approaching over the tops of the showcases. Alexander the Greater was a very large, very dignified, and very lazy maltese cat. His predecessor had been named Alexander the Great and so, of course, his name could only be Alexander the Greater. Tom absently dug his fingers in the cat's thick ruff and repeated the question, "Now, *what* do you suppose she meant by that?" He passed an inquiring hand over his hair and then, in spite of the fact that a customer had just entered and was looking vaguely around, he hurried to the stairway, bolted down it, switched on the light over the wash-bowl, and looked anxiously at his reflection in the cracked mirror. Except that a stray lock stood up independently on his crown, he could not see that his hair was different from usual or, for that matter, different from any other fellow's hair—except in colour. He had never been particularly pleased with the colour of his hair. There was too much red in it. Perhaps that was it; perhaps Mrs. Morris had been poking sly fun at the colour of his hair. And yet—— He shook his head as he hurried back upstairs to do up the two pairs of skates. It didn't seem as though that was just it.

CHAPTER VI

TWO PAIRS OF SKATES

He didn't set out for the Morrisses house until nearly eight o'clock. They had been busier than usual in the store and had not got rid of the last customer until almost a quarter-past six. Then, although Tom spent no unnecessary time on his supper, it was way after seven by the time he hurried around to his room to change his clothes. It would never do, he assured himself, to make a call in his every-day suit! As he was far more particular in dressing than he had ever been before in his life, he made slow work of it and was horrified to find that his watch proclaimed the time to be twelve minutes of eight! In something of a panic then, he dashed downstairs and along Locust Street, the bundle of skates under his arm. He had meant to walk to the Morrisses, but now it was necessary to spend a nickel and ride there by trolley car. Why, they might be getting ready for bed by the time he got there!

He was a good deal excited. Also, he was a good deal nervous. He remembered reading somewhere once that when calling you were supposed to present your visiting card to the maid or the butler or whoever it was that opened the door to you. Tom had no visiting card, very naturally, and he wondered whether the lack of it would matter very much. He might explain to the maid that he had accidentally left his cards at home in his other suit. Then he reflected that when you carried visiting cards you were presumed to have more than two suits, and that it would be better to say that he had left the cards on his bureau. Then, having apologised in such fashion, he would give his name and ask to see Mrs. Morris. He guessed that would be all right. He rather hoped, though, it would be a man instead of a maid who answered the door. He could make his explanation more easily to a man. [65]

He wondered whether Sidney Morris would mind his coming. He hoped Sidney wouldn't think he had suggested the visit. He wouldn't think for a moment of forcing his acquaintance on a chap like Sidney Morris, who was one of the most popular and sought-after fellows in school! And besides, Tom reflected, the Morrisses must be very well-off, and it didn't seem likely that Sidney would care to have much to do with a fellow who worked in a store. Of course it was perfectly bully of Mrs. Morris to want him to know her son, but he feared that Mrs. Morris hadn't stopped to consider the difference in their positions. [66]

The car seemed to crawl through town, and Tom, in a fever of impatience lest his visit be timed too late, glanced at his watch every two or three blocks. Finally, though, the conductor called Alameda Avenue and Tom descended. It wasn't hard to find the Morris residence, for the number of the house was plainly in view on each of the round electric globes that flanked the gate. A short path led to a stone-pillared porch. The house was not so grand and impressive as he had feared it might be. It was of stone as to the lower story and shingles above and had many dormers of different sizes. But Tom didn't have time to receive more than a fleeting impression of its outward appearance then, for a dozen strides took him to the door. There he paused a moment, in the soft glow of an overhead light, to rehearse his speech to the maid or the butler. Finally he pressed the button beside the wide doorway and waited. An inner door opened and Tom saw disappointedly through a meshed curtain that it was a woman who was answering his summons. But when the outer door gave way it was Mrs. Morris herself who stood there. In the background a maid in cap and apron hovered uncertainly for a minute and disappeared. Tom, in his surprise, almost recited his piece about the visiting cards to Mrs. Morris, and would have doubtless had not that lady held out her hand and taken the conduct of affairs at once. Before he knew it, Tom was inside, fumbling with his hat and holding out his bundle insistently. [67]

"I brought the skates," he said.

"That's very nice of you. And we'll take them upstairs in just a moment. First, though, I want you to meet my husband. I've told him about you."

Tom followed her across a soft-piled rug and through a wide doorway into a room all warmth and colour and leather chairs and book-lined walls and low lights. A very tall man with grey moustaches and a deep, pleasant voice shook hands with him, spoke of the cold weather, thanked him for coming, and, as Tom backed away, colliding with a table, said he hoped he'd see him again. Tom was glad when he was safely through the library doors once more, and Mrs. Morris, chatting gaily to put him at his ease, led the way up a wide, carpeted stairway so gradual of ascent that one hardly realised one was climbing. Another broad hall, with silvery walls hung with many unobtrusive pictures and furnished with easy-chairs and couches in cretonne, received him, and across this he followed to a doorway. [68]

"Here he is, Sid," said Mrs. Morris. She stood aside to let Tom enter first. "You see," she went on, "I can't announce you by name because I don't know what your name is."

"It's Tom Pollock, ma'am," stammered Tom.

"Well, then, this is Tom, Sidney. And he's brought the skates for you to look at. Tom, this is my son, Sidney."

The boy in the easy-chair held out his left hand. "Don't mind my not getting up, do you?" he asked. "They won't let me move around much yet. Glad to meet you. I think I've seen you over at school."

Mrs. Morris pushed forward a chair and Tom sat down, holding his hat very firmly and finding nothing to say just then. Sidney was already undoing the package, frankly eager. Mrs. Morris leaned above him smilingly. Tom's eyes wandered about the room. It was certainly jolly. He had never seen anything at all like it, had never even imagined that such a room could exist. There were two recessed windows with wide, comfortable seats beneath them and low book-cases at each side. (Just the place, Tom thought, to curl up and read.) The walls were papered in grey and the big rug that not quite covered the floor was grey, too, with a broad border of dark blue. The bed, on which the clothes were neatly and invitingly turned down, was a sort of a grey as well, and the silken coverlid that lay across the foot was grey and blue. Even the furniture and the window curtains repeated the colours. A small desk near the chair in which the occupant of the splendid apartment was seated held books and papers and writing materials and a green-shaded electric light that could be twisted about in any direction and to any height. On the walls hung a few plainly-framed pictures, while above the fireplace, in which a coal fire glowed cosily, were two gaily-hued posters, a pair of fencing foils, crossed under a mask, and a yard-long photograph of a football game in progress. Beneath that, on the mantel, was a long row of photographs. Tom's examination, a little envious by now, was interrupted by Sidney.

"I say, Mumsie, they're peaches! Gee, I don't know which pair I want. What do you say, Tom?"

"I—I guess I wouldn't know which to take if it was me," answered Tom shyly. "They're both dandy, aren't they?"

"Know anything about these tubular ones?" asked Sidney. "I don't think I've ever seen a pair before."

"They're new," said Tom. "They look pretty strong, though."

"They've got a dandy edge. I sort of think I'll take these, Mumsie. Gee, I wish I could try them to-morrow! You skate, don't you, Tom?"

"Not very well."

"Ever play hockey?"

Tom shook his head. "Not real hockey, I guess. We kids used to knock a hard rubber ball or a hunk of wood around on the ice. We had goal posts, too, but I suppose real hockey is—is scientific, isn't it?"

Sidney replied with enthusiasm that it certainly was. When Sidney was enthusiastic his brown eyes sparkled and his lean, good-looking face lighted up from the firm, pointed chin to the dark hair brushed smoothly back from the forehead. Sidney was sixteen, small-boned, and as lithe as a greyhound. As right end on the school eleven he had won laurels all season until an accident to the shoulder, that was still immovably bandaged, had laid him off. In baseball, too, in hockey, and, in fact, in all games and athletic endeavours he excelled by reason of a natural ability. He was the sort of boy who, if thrown into the water, will strike out and swim as inherently as a puppy; who if handed a baseball bat will swing it as knowingly as an experienced player. Lean, supple, and graceful, his muscles were as responsive to demands upon them as—well, as a kitten's! And anyone who has watched a kitten at play will appreciate the simile. He had a temperament to match. He was ardent, impulsive, and at times quick-tempered. He possessed good judgment, but was liable to be biassed by his sympathies. He was extremely popular at school and something of a leader in the sophomore class. Being an only child, it was a good deal of a miracle that he had not been spoiled. Most of the credit was due to Mr. Morris, but much to Sidney himself.

While Sidney was still explaining hockey, Mrs. Morris left the room. Only Tom saw her go, for Sidney was much too interested in his subject. "I'm going out for the team," he explained. "Why don't you try it? Even if you don't make it, you'll have a lot of fun. Why don't you!"

"I wouldn't have time," said Tom regretfully. "I work in Cummings and Wright's after school every day."

"I forgot that. Do you like it?"

"Yes, pretty well. They're awfully nice to me there and I guess I was lucky to get a job with them. Of course, though, I'd like mighty well to—to play hockey and football and things, you see."

"That's tough, isn't it?" said Sidney sympathetically. "I suppose—I mean—well, you *have* to do it, don't you?"

"Yes," returned Tom. "It pays for my room. I live down on Locust Street, by the railroad." He said this with just a trace of defiance and watched to see how Sidney would take it. Probably he wouldn't be very anxious to pursue the acquaintance of a fellow who lived in such an unfashionable part of town. But if Sidney was shocked or surprised he certainly didn't show it.

"That must be pretty good fun," he said, "living all by yourself like that. You don't have to tell anyone where you're going or anything, do you? And you can stay out as late as you like, too! I'd like to be able to do that. Say, I think you're a plucky kid to work like you do and earn money. I wonder if I could if I had to?" He was silent a moment, turning the matter over in his mind and frowning a little. "I don't believe so," he said finally. "I guess I'd just starve to death if it came to earning my living!"

Tom had no views on the subject and so asked about Sidney's injury.

"Doc says I can go out in three or four days. He's a bit of an old granny, I think. I wish *he* had to sit around here with his shoulder done up in a vise! And after I get out I'm not to use that arm

for nearly two weeks. Hang it, by the time I can do anything they'll have the hockey team all made up!" And he kicked disgustedly at the wrapping paper which had fallen from his knees. "A fellow was in here this afternoon and he said the ice was bully. Say, do you folks keep hockey sticks?"

"No, just skates," said Tom.

"I should think you would. You'd sell a lot of them. The only place where you can get them is Merrill's. Why don't you get Cummings and Wright to keep them?"

"I'll speak to Mr. Cummings about it," said Tom. "We got a lot of dandy—dandy—what are those things you slide down the snow on? The things that are like sleds without any runners?"

"Toboggans? By jiminy, that's what I'll ask the folks to get me for Christmas! Some day I'll come down and have a look at them. Are you generally there after school?"

"Yes, unless they send me on an errand. I have to trot around a good deal." Tom arose, still tightly clutching his hat. "I guess I'd better be going now," he added.

"Oh, hold on! Don't go yet. It isn't late, is it?"

"It's after nine," said Tom.

"That's early. And you don't have to get home until you want to."

"I—I've got some studying to do," responded Tom. He really wanted to stay, but feared Mrs. Morris would think he was overdoing it.

"Well," said Sidney regretfully, "if you have to! Will you take this other pair back or shall I send them to-morrow?"

"I'll take them," said Tom. "It's no bother."

"All right. Tell them to charge the other pair to my father, please. Thanks for bringing them. And say, what are you doing to-morrow night?"

"Doing? Just—just nothing particular, I guess."

"Well, can't you drop in for awhile? I'll do as much for you if you get laid up," laughed Sidney. "I wish you would, honest! You don't know how tired a fellow gets of just reading. I've got my lessons up to next week some time, I guess, and I've read every book in sight. Some of the fellows come in now and then, but they don't want to stay more than a minute. I don't blame them, though; there's too much doing."

"I'd like to very much," answered Tom, "if—if your mother thinks I ought to."

"Of course she does! Don't you, Mumsie?" Mrs. Morris entered at that moment. "Don't you think he ought to come around to-morrow evening and see me!" explained Sidney.

"I think we'd all be very glad if he would," responded Mrs. Morris kindly. "Perhaps, though, he has too much to do, dear."

"No'm, I haven't, and I'd like to come very much."

"That's the ticket! Come early and we'll have a fine long chin. Say, Mumsie, what do you suppose he does? Works in Cummings and Wright's and makes money to pay for his room and board! What do you know about that?"

"I think it's very creditable, don't you, Sid?"

"Rather! Wish I could get out and do something like that! It would be jolly, I should think."

Mrs. Morris smiled and patted his shoulder.

"I don't earn enough for my board, too," corrected Tom. "Just for my lodging. They don't pay me very much because I'm not there very long, you see. I saved up some money last summer and the summer before. My board comes out of that."

"Bet they don't pay you enough," said Sidney convincingly. "I know old man Wright. He's Billy Wright's father, you know, Mumsie. He's a bit of a tightwad, I guess."

"That's awful slang, Sid," Mrs. Morris reproved smilingly. "I'm sure you don't use slang, Tom, do you?"

Tom grinned embarrassedly and Sidney chuckled. "I—I'm afraid so, ma'am, sometimes," owned Tom.

"I'll bet you do! Why, say, Mumsie uses slang herself, Tom!"

"Sidney!"

"Yes, you do! The other day you said something was 'the limit.'"

"It was the butter we got from the new man," laughed Mrs. Morris. "And it was the limit, too! Are you going to take this pair of skates, dear?"

"Yes'm; and he's going to lug the other back. I guess you'll have to wrap them up, Tom. I'm not much good yet."

Tom had to lay his hat aside to do it and somehow losing hold of his hat seemed to increase his embarrassment. When the skates were back in the paper, it was with vast relief that he seized his hat once more. He had been aware during the operation that Mrs. Morris and her son had been talking together in low tones and now, when he stood up to leave, Sidney said:

"I say, Tom, Mumsie says——"

"No, Sid!"

"Well, anyway——" He paused and looked appealingly at his mother. "You say it, Mumsie, please."

"Very well," replied Mrs. Morris with her pleasant laugh. "Sid and I, Tom, want you to keep those other skates for yourself. They're a sort of Christmas present from the Morris family. It's very near Christmas, you know."

"He doesn't have to wait until Christmas to use them, though, does he?" said Sidney. "And, I say, Mumsie, maybe he'd rather have a pair like mine."

"Would you?" asked Mrs. Morris.

"No'm. I mean—I—I'm awfully much obliged—and thank you very much—but I guess I'd rather not," stammered Tom in an ecstasy of embarrassment.

"Don't be a chump!" begged Sidney. "Of course you'll take them. Why not? After coming all the way out here to-night and——"

"That was part of my work, anyway," said Tom. "And I wanted to come——"

"But that isn't the reason we want you to have them," said Mrs. Morris sweetly. "It's just because you're—oh, just because you're a nice boy and we like you. We do, don't we, Sid?"

"Sure," laughed Sidney. "Say, Tom, you keep them and some day we'll go out to the pond and I'll show you how to use a hockey stick."

"Why—why, I suppose—if you really want me to have them——"

"We really do, Tom," said Mrs. Morris.

"They're pretty expensive, though," Tom demurred anxiously. "And I've got a pair already."

"Are they as good as those?" asked Sidney.

"Oh, no; they're just a pair of wooden strap skates. They—they do very well, though."

"Pshaw, a fellow can't skate with straps around his foot," said Sidney contemptuously. "You just see how much better you'll get along with those. If you'd rather have a pair like these, though, you can have them; can't he, Mumsie?"

"I'd rather keep these," said Tom shyly, "because—because they're the ones you give—gave me." And he looked gratefully at Mrs. Morris.

She clapped her hands softly. "Oh, we do like you, Tom!" she cried. "That was a perfect thing to say, wasn't it, Sid?"

Sidney grinned. "He's gone on you, Mumsie."

"Sidney!"

"He is, though." He laughed across at Tom. "All the fellows fall in love with my mother, Tom. You can't help it."

Tom blushed hotly, and Mrs. Morris said reprovingly: "Sid, you shouldn't say such awful things, dear. Tom may not understand your fun."

"I can understand what—what he said," muttered Tom boldly, and Sidney applauded by rattling the skates he held. Mrs. Morris blushed a little herself then.

"You're both rather awful," she said. "And it's about time for you to be thinking of bed, Sid. Come, Tom, we'll leave him to consider his sins. I'll be up again, Sid, in a few minutes."

Tom said good night to Sidney, repeating his promise to return to-morrow evening, and followed Mrs. Morris downstairs. At the door she held out her hand to him and Tom took it awkwardly.

"Good night, Tom," she said. "Thanks for coming. Sidney enjoyed your visit very much. And so did I. And don't forget to come again."

"No'm, thanks. Good night, Mrs. Morris."

"Good night. And, Tom!" Tom was outside now and the door was slowly closing. "*Please* don't worry about your hair!"

CHAPTER VII

TOM GAINS PROMOTION

That was the beginning of the friendship. Sidney, who had begun being nice to Tom to please his mother, continued being nice to him because he liked him. There was an earnest, downright quality to Tom that the older boy was attracted by. Then when Sidney found that, in spite of an inclination toward unusual seriousness in one of his age, Tom had a perfectly good, if somewhat repressed, sense of humour, Sidney took to him in earnest. The boys were quite unlike in many

ways. Sidney was small-boned, lithe, graceful, and dark. Tom was heavier, less finely built, and light. Sidney was impulsive, Tom deliberate. Both were capable of deep enthusiasms, but Tom's were of slower birth and, perhaps, of longer duration. It is not unusual for boys to form friendships for those quite opposed to them both physically and mentally. In such a partnership what one lacks the other supplies. This explains to some extent the friendship that sprang up between Sidney Morris and Tom Pollock. For a week Tom believed that when Sidney was once more off the invalid list and free to seek the companionship of his old acquaintances he would see very little of him. The reverse, however, proved to be the case.

[83]

The friendship, instead of ceasing, grew. Sidney sought Tom at the hardware store in the late afternoons, stamping in sweated and coated with his skating boots hung from a hockey stick over his shoulder and his face flushed by the afternoon's practice. Then he would perch himself on the edge of a counter upstairs or on a box in the packing room below and tell enthusiastically of the practice. Mr. Cummings viewed him amusedly, Mr. Wright with deep scowls. He made friends at once with Joe Gillig, and I'm not at all certain that duties weren't neglected sometimes when the three boys got together at the back of the store. At least once a week, often twice, Sidney haled Tom home to dinner with him. At first Tom went with misgivings, but when he realised that both Mr. and Mrs. Morris were glad to have him, or anyone else that Sidney wanted, he got over his shyness and enjoyed those evenings immeasurably. After dinner they went up to Sidney's room and talked and talked on all the thousand and one subjects dear to a boy's heart. I think Sidney did most of the talking, however, which was to be expected since he had much more to talk about. Tom's existence was rather hum-drum and few experiences or adventures fell to his lot those days.

[84]

In school the boys saw little of each other since they were in different classes, but notes passed between them constantly, frightfully important notes making engagements for meetings after school or at lunch hour or containing news that couldn't possibly wait to be told verbally. Of course Sidney did not give up his other friends, but instead of spreading his friendship over a half-dozen boys as he had done before, he gave most of it to Tom. They became inseparable. As may be expected, a good deal of fun, some good-natured and some malicious, was poked at the pair. Disgruntled ones called Tom a "hayseed" and a "Rube." This annoyed Sidney more than it did Tom, however.

"I don't mind," he would say calmly. "I guess that's what I am, anyway."

"I'd like one of them to say that to me," said Sidney warmly. "I'd punch him!"

[85]

Tom did not get the promised instruction in hockey that winter, for the reason that he never could find an opportunity to go with Sidney to the pond. Neither did he have a chance to see the hockey team in action. But he heard all about it from Sidney, who had gained a much-coveted position on it, and mourned with his chum over defeats and triumphed with him over victories; and the two were very evenly apportioned that year.

Meanwhile, Christmas came and went, and the New Year was rung in. The holiday season made a deal of hard work for Tom, for the store kept open every evening until Christmas and more than once he was forced to delay his departure for Derry until Sunday morning. Christmas Day was spent at home. He had purchased small gifts for everyone, including Star, who got a new collar, and he received presents from all. Uncle Israel gave him a five-dollar gold-piece, a deed of generosity as surprising as it was welcome to Tom. Sidney had thrust a small parcel into Tom's hand the day before, and when Tom opened it Christmas morning he found a pretty gold stick-pin set with a topaz that, although he didn't realise it, was exactly the colour of some of the big freckles that adorned his nose! In the afternoon he took his skates down to the creek and joined the merry throng of boys and girls. It was the first time he had tried the skates and they proved wonderful, besides being objects of envy to the other fellows. Jim Billings, whose father Tom had worked for last summer, remarked sneeringly after an examination of the new skates, that "Tom Pollock was gettin' mighty stuck-up since he'd gone to the city!"

[86]

The next evening Tom accompanied Sidney home and stayed to dinner and saw the big Christmas Tree that was strung with tiny electric lights of white and red and blue. And Sidney showed him all his presents, and there was a whole big lot of them, too, Tom thought. One of them was the toboggan that Sidney had expressed a wish for and another was a little easel calendar in red paper that looked something like leather if you didn't get too close to it. Sidney told Tom, with an arm over his shoulders, that it was "just bully" and that he liked it better than almost anything he'd got. The calendar was Tom's modest gift.

[87]

After New Year's life settled down again into the old manner. Tom studied hard at school and worked hard at the store, but he enjoyed both. Having a friend like Sidney had done away with loneliness and he no longer spent solitary evenings in his room. Once in a while Sidney came down to Locust Street, but usually Tom went to Sidney's house. His comings and goings there were now matters of no comment. Mr. and Mrs. Morris always greeted him warmly and made him feel at home and free to come and go as he liked. Sometimes another fellow would drop in, sometimes two or three, and they had very merry times up in Sidney's room. But Tom liked best the evenings when Sidney and he were alone. Several of the boys he had met through Sidney he liked very much, but he was apt to feel rather shy and constrained when they were around. Very often Mrs. Morris joined them for a few minutes, much to the pleasure of Tom, who still secretly adored her. Once, a month or so after their first meeting, he asked Sidney what he supposed his mother meant by her frequent allusions to his hair.

[88]

"She's always telling me not to trouble about it," said Tom, mystified. "I suppose she's just sort of making fun about it because it's red."

"I don't call it red," answered Sidney. "It's a dandy colour. You never know what Mumsie has in her head when she says things like that. She's always having little jokes to herself. She's funny."

"She's terribly nice," said Tom. "And—and she's the prettiest lady in Amesville, too, Sid."

"You bet she is!"

One February morning, when Tom had trudged through a raging blizzard to the high school only to learn when he reached it that the "no school" whistle had blown a half-hour before, he decided to keep on to Sidney's house. It was a good mile out there from the school and the wind and snow were cutting up high jinks, but Tom scorned the trolley cars, not altogether from motives of economy, and walked, fighting every step of the way. When he reached the Morrises the maid told him that Master Sidney had just gone downtown. Tom was turning away when Mrs. Morris appeared and insisted on his coming in. [89]

"Sid won't be more than a half-hour," she said. "He went in to get something for his wireless set." (A wireless receiving set had been amongst his Christmas presents and both he and Tom were greatly interested in it.) "Come in and get warm, Tom." Then, seeing his condition, "Why, Tom Pollock!" she exclaimed. "I believe you walked!"

"Yes'm, I did," answered Tom apologetically.

"Of all things on a day like this!" Mrs. Morris shook her head hopelessly. "Well, boys have no sense, anyway. Now take that coat right off and— And no overshoes, either! Tom Pollock, you ought to be spanked and put to bed!"

"Yes'm," agreed Tom sheepishly.

Five minutes later, divested of his wet clothes and chastely attired in a voluminous bath-robe of Mr. Morris's, he was toasting in front of a big fire in the library and drinking beef tea that Mrs. Morris made by dropping a mysterious dark-brown tablet into a cup of hot water. It was very nice, and its effect, or perhaps the combined effects of the hard tussle with the blizzard and the warmth of the fire, was to make Tom feel delightfully drowsy and comfortable. When, presently, he had finished the beef tea and Mrs. Morris had returned from bearing away the empty cup, an unwonted boldness came to him. [90]

"I wish," he said as Mrs. Morris sank into a chair at the other side of the hearth, "I wish you'd tell me, please, what's the matter with my hair."

She looked at it concernedly. Tom, however, saw the laughter in her eyes. "Is it bothering you again, Tom?" she asked. "I'm so sorry!"

"It—it don't bother me at all," he responded desperately. "Only you're all the time telling me not to let it! Is it just because it's red?"

Then Mrs. Morris laughed deliciously. "No, Tom, it isn't," she said. "I suppose I've been horribly mean to tease you about it, haven't I?"

"I didn't mind," Tom assured her earnestly. "Only—I wondered what it was. I asked Sid and he said he guessed it was just one of your jokes."

"Of course it was; a rather silly one, too, Tom. Do you remember stopping one day in front of Sewall's jewelry store and looking in a mirror?"

"No'm, I don't think so." Tom shook his head. [91]

"It was away last summer—or early in the fall, Tom. You looked in the mirror and frowned and then you took off your hat and smoothed your hair. And then you nodded at yourself quite satisfied and looked up and caught me smiling at you. Don't you remember now?"

"Yes'm." Tom laughed shamefacedly.

"You scowled at me terrifically," went on Mrs. Morris. "It amused me because I thought I knew just how you felt at being caught primping. And then when I saw you in Cummings and Wright's that time I recognised you at once and thought I'd have a little fun with you. So I asked about your hair. That's all there is to it. As to your hair being red, why, it isn't; not really red, you know. It's a perfectly wonderful shade and I wish I had it, Tom!"

Tom thought her own soft brown hair infinitely more lovely and becoming, but he didn't say so. He only grinned.

"Are you terribly angry with me?" she went on smilingly.

"No'm." Tom shook his head again. "I—I guess I sort of liked it!"

Then Sidney burst in, laden with packages, and dragged Tom upstairs to witness the installation of a new detector. [92]

At the store Tom had been making strides. As yet there had been no mention of a raise in wages; he was still receiving his two dollars a week and being credited with fifty cents against the price of the pump; but he had progressed wonderfully. To be sure, he still swept and washed windows and ran an occasional errand, but he was at last a real clerk when those duties did not engage his attention. It had begun when Tom had acted on Sidney's suggestion and explained to Mr. Cummings that it might be a good plan to keep hockey sticks as well as skates. Mr. Cummings had fallen in with the idea at once and had ordered the sticks. Unfortunately they had proved, on arrival, to be rather inferior and purchasers had objected to them.

"Well," said Mr. Cummings when Tom reported the matter, "you find out what make of stick

the boys want and let me know. This is your undertaking, Tom."

So Tom found out where the best hockey sticks were made and a new consignment was ordered. Gradually pucks and all the paraphernalia of hockey were added and, in some way, the sale of those things became Tom's especial task. Boys who came for skates or sticks or leg-guards or pucks sought him out and didn't want to be waited on by anyone else. Mr. Cummings laughingly referred to "Tom's Department." But "Tom's Department" made such a good showing by the middle of the winter that Mr. Cummings was both surprised and gratified. After that Tom had only to list an article wanted and Mr. Cummings sent in the order at once. There was no question as to the advisability of carrying it.

The last of February, Joe Gillig caught a heavy cold and took to bed with congestion of the lungs, and Tom suddenly found himself elevated temporarily to the position of clerk. Mr. Cummings was at first inclined to look for someone to take Joe's place while he was out, but Mr. Wright objected. "Let Tom do his work for him," he said. "I guess he can sell nails as well as Joe." Mr. Cummings agreed doubtfully, and for three weeks Tom was exempt from window washing, sweeping, and errands. At first he was a trifle alarmed at the new responsibility, but he got on perfectly well, and Mr. Cummings was forced to agree with his partner that Tom could "sell nails as well as Joe." At the end of the fortnight he even went further than that and acknowledged that Tom promised to become in time a much better salesman than Joe. For Tom took a great deal of pains to please customers; and those who looked askance at him at first on account of his youthfulness and showed a preference for being waited on by one of the partners soon changed their minds. Tom was somehow able to take a personal interest in the wants of even the humblest patron and forked out two pounds of ten-penny nails with as much care and attention as he would have displayed in filling a hundred-dollar order. If a customer wanted an article not in stock and which Tom believed he could obtain from another store, he did not, as Joe would have done, carelessly inform the purchaser that they were out of it. Tom said: "We haven't that in just now, sir, but I'll see that you have it this afternoon, if that will do. Where shall I send it?" Then at dinner time Tom scurried around to one or another of the rival stores, found the article, paid for it, and sent it out on the afternoon delivery. The first time he did this he presented his bill to Miss Miller and was reimbursed. Not long afterward Mr. Wright came across the item and made inquiries. Tom was called in to explain. "But what's the use of doing a thing like that?" inquired Mr. Wright irritably. "You paid eighty-five cents for the thing and sold it at eighty-five cents. Where does the profit to us come in, young man?"

"There isn't any profit, sir," Tom answered. "But the customer gets what he wants, sir. It doesn't cost us anything and maybe we keep the man's trade. If we tell him we're out of a certain thing, he might go to Bullard's or Stevens and Green's for it and keep on going there."

Mr. Wright said "Humph!" and rattled a pen-holder. Mr. Cummings, however, nodded. "You're right, Tom," he said. "That's well reasoned. You evidently think it pays to please your customers, eh?"

"Yes, sir; don't you?" asked Tom innocently.

"I do." Mr. Cummings smiled. "But lots of employés don't, son. You keep on with that notion. It's a good one. And whenever you can find something at another store that we haven't got you get it. Have them make out a bill for it and get your money from Miss Miller. That right, Horace?"

"I guess so," answered Mr. Wright. "Seems to me, though, we'd ought to have the thing and not be buying from other hardware stores."

"Bless us, we can't keep everything folks ask for! Nobody can. But, as Tom here says, there's no need to let folks know it!"

It was a day or two later that Tom was again summoned to the office in a slack period. Mr. Cummings was there alone.

"Sit down a minute, Tom," he said. "I want to talk about that department of yours. It's done pretty well this winter. Did you know it?"

"I thought maybe it had," answered Tom modestly. "I know we sold a good deal, sir."

"We certainly did. And the profits in those goods are high, too. Now, look here, why don't we go into the thing in earnest? I've talked to Mr. Wright about it and he's agreeable. Why not put in a regular sporting goods department, eh? Aren't there lots of things boys use in summer as well as winter?"

"Oh, yes, sir! You see, they'll begin playing baseball pretty soon; and golf, too, although I don't know if there's much of that played around here."

"Of course there is! There are three clubs within ten miles of town. What else?"

"I guess that's all, sir, in summer, isn't it?"

"You ought to know better than I, son. Well, could we sell bats and balls and golf things, do you think?"

"I don't see why not," replied Tom eagerly. "I'm sure the high school fellows would get their things here if they knew we kept them."

"We'll advertise then. We'll announce in the papers that we've added a sporting goods department, eh?"

"Yes, sir, and I think it would pay to put a small advertisement in the *Brown-and-Blue*."

"That's the school paper?"

"Yes, sir, the monthly. Fellows would be sure to see it and, besides, they like to trade with firms who—who patronise the paper."

"All right, we'll do that, too. Now I'm going to put this up to you, Tom. You take right hold. Get in touch with the dealers, get their catalogues, find out their trade prices and make up a list of what we want to start out with. I wouldn't go in very heavy as to quantity just at first. We'll find out how we stand, I guess, before we plunge very deep. But get a good assortment of stuff."

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Now, another thing. After the first of next month you do nothing but sell, Tom. We'll get someone to look after the windows and sweep up. Of course you'll help Joe in the packing room, just as now, but you'll be a salesman instead of a—well, general utility man!"

"I—I'd like that, sir," said Tom.

"Of course you would. You'll have the sporting goods under your management, son, and we'll see if we can't make them pay. Of course we expect to make you a small raise, Tom. I haven't talked that over with Mr. Wright yet, but I'll let you know in a few days. We can't increase your wages much just yet, but if you make good we'll be fair with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Cummings. I—I'll do my best."

"That's right. Do your best, Tom, and you'll get on. It's the boy who does his best all the time that won't stay down, son. Just as it's the fellow who tries to get along by giving his employers as little as possible who never moves up. Remember that. Now you get busy and get your orders in. You can have two sections of shelves on the left of the door down there for your goods, and the cases in front. If you have to have more space, I guess we can find it. There's a lot of that builders' hardware that would be better placed back here, I guess. Well, that's all. Let me hear what you learn and keep me posted as to how things are going. But don't bother me with questions, son. This is your affair. Make it go."

CHAPTER VIII

AN OUT-CURVE

The new department started up the last week in March, and none too soon. It had been a hard, cold winter, but its very severity seemed to wear it out along toward the first of that month and a succession of spring-like days turned boys' thoughts toward baseball. The advertisement had appeared in the March issue of the *Brown-and-Blue* and the daily papers had made announcement of the fact that Cummings and Wright had installed the most thorough, up-to-date sporting goods department to be found in the state. This was perhaps an exaggeration, but advertisements are prone to exaggerate. It was a pretty thoroughly stocked department, though. Tom had been both surprised and a little alarmed when the catalogues from dealers and manufacturers had reached him. There were so many, many more things to be purchased than he had dreamed of! He had begun a list and then stopped appalled by the magnitude of the order and the size of the total cost, and had gone to Mr. Cummings in perturbation.

"How much? Over four hundred dollars?" asked Mr. Cummings. "Can we sell the things if we get them?"

"Why, yes, sir; I hope so. I think so. I don't see why——"

"Then get them."

And Tom got them, and the grand total of the investment was not four hundred dollars, or a little over, but nearly six hundred! And for a week or so poor Tom woke up at night bathed in a cold perspiration after a nightmare in which he saw himself buried under a deluge of sporting goods that no one would buy! It was an anxious time at first. Tom viewed the crowded shelves and showcases and felt his heart sink, for six hundred dollars seemed a frightfully large sum of money to him and he was constantly wondering whether the firm would be able to survive if the goods didn't sell! He need not have worried about that, but he didn't know it then.

He had put in a line of baseball goods that was as complete as it was possible to have it. There were bats of all grades and prices, balls, masks, gloves, mitts, chest protectors, base-bags, score-books, and a dozen lesser things, all more or less necessary for the conduct of the national pastime. But baseball goods were only a part of that stock. Golf made its demands as well, although Tom had held back there somewhat, and the wants of the tennis enthusiast had to be provided for. Then the captain of the high school track team had asked about running shoes and attire, and Tom had supplemented his first order. There seemed, in short, no end to what he must buy and keep in stock if Cummings and Wright's was really to have a fully equipped department. And Tom groaned at the thought of what would happen when autumn came and he had to think of football goods! Already he had been forced to ask for a third section of shelves!

But Mr. Cummings appeared quite untroubled, and so Tom dared to hope. Even Mr. Wright seemed undismayed by the crowded shelves and took an unusual interest in the goods, pulling them out of place—and leaving them out, too—asking questions as to purpose and price and

trying Tom sorely at busy times. And then, quite suddenly, his fears vanished. A Saturday morning came and, as it seemed to the anxious manager of the sporting goods department (that was Joe's title for him), half of juvenile Amesville poured into the store. Tom was busy that day; busy and happy! Many of the boys came only to look and covet, but there were plenty of sales for all that and the day's total footed up to forty-three dollars. After that Tom ceased worrying and within a week was sending more orders. The manager of the baseball team came to him and asked prices on new uniforms for the players. He found Tom at a loss, but a reference to catalogues soon put him in position to talk business and in the end, not then, but three days later, he began to take orders. Every fellow on the team had to buy and pay for his own uniform and, as Cummings and Wright's had been declared the proper place to purchase—Tom having made a special price on an order of nine or more suits—the fellows soon began putting their names down. Grey shirts and trousers and caps, brown and blue striped stockings, and grey webbed belts comprised the outfit and the price was four dollars and a quarter. At first one or two fellows who had last year's suits in good preservation held off, but Spencer Williams, the manager, bullied them, and, when Tom displayed one of the outfits in the window, they fell into line. There was scant profit on those outfits, but Tom called it "good business" and was satisfied.

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As complete as the stock was, Tom was continually having demands for things he hadn't got. As when a fussy, grey-whiskered little gentleman came in and demanded "an aluminum putter." Poor Tom didn't know what an aluminum putter was, but he didn't say so. Instead he regretted the fact that he couldn't supply one just then and ended, after the fussy gentleman had fussed to his heart's content, by taking the customer's order for one. Later he dipped into a catalogue and found it listed. But Tom's way made a friend of the golfer and he was a constant and heavy purchaser of balls and clubs after that.

Later on orders came in frequently by mail from the towns around, proving that the department had acquired more than a purely local fame. In Amesville the grammar school boys followed the lead of their older brothers in most things and they were quick to emulate them in patronising Cummings and Wright's. Cummings and Wright's, in fact, received from the high school a sort of official recognition. It was the first of the hardware stores to advertise in the school monthly, although another dropped into line later, and the students, following the *Brown-and-Blue's* slogan, "Patronise our advertisers," quickly adopted it as a place to make purchasers of not only athletic goods, but other supplies as well. Boys became so accustomed to going there that by the middle of spring the store was a general meeting-place, a sort of high-school headquarters. It was Sidney who first suggested to Tom that the latter offer to post school notices in the window. After that, and more especially when the athletic activities were at their height, one could always find one or more bulletins pasted against the glass there, such as, "A. H. S. B. A. Practice to-day at three-thirty sharp. No cuts." Or, "A. H. S. T. T. Candidates for the Track Team report at four o'clock Wednesday." Following up this idea, Tom began posting the scores of the baseball games throughout the country, both professional and collegiate.

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Mr. Cummings had had a carpenter divide the window at the right of the doorway in two with a neat oak panel and Tom had some twenty-five square feet of space therein in which to display his goods. At first Joe Gillig dressed the window for him, for Tom doubted his own ability, but presently the latter did it himself and managed to make a far more attractive display than Joe by not crowding his goods and by confining each week the display to some one branch of sport or some one article in variety.

When, as happened late in the spring, a sporting goods house in the East sent a demonstrator to exhibit a home exercising outfit in the window, the store and Tom's department in particular received a whole lot of free advertising from the papers, while the crowds that assembled daily to watch the good-looking young athlete in the window go through his motions with the exerciser made many other merchants along Main Street green with envy. But this was in May, and several things happened before that that should be set down here.

Tom had hardly hoped for a raise of more than one dollar in his weekly wages and so when Mr. Cummings duly announced to him that beginning with the first day of April his salary would be just doubled Tom's surprise was even greater than his delight.

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"It don't seem as if I was worth that much yet, sir," he said doubtfully. "It isn't as if I was here all day, you see."

"Tom," replied Mr. Cummings, "at the risk of giving you what you youngsters call a swelled head, I'm going to tell you that in the four or five hours you are here you do about as much work as a good many clerks in this town do all day. Besides, we're paying you, partly, for that sporting-goods idea of yours. It was a mighty good idea and it made money for us, and I guess it's going to make more. Besides that, son, you want to remember that summer is coming after awhile and that summer is a pretty busy season with us. Then you'll be here all day and you can make up any time you think you may be owing us."

"Well, it's awfully good of you," said Tom gratefully. "And I guess you'd better keep out a dollar now instead of fifty cents toward that pump. I won't need the whole five dollars," he added in rather awed tones. Five dollars a week seemed a veritable fortune to him just then, for of late his resources had been getting smaller and smaller and he had begun to wonder if he would ever get through the spring.

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Meanwhile, he had made many acquaintances and some friends. At high school he was a person of prominence. The older boys admired his pluck and industry and liked him for his quiet, contained manner, his cheerfulness, and his unfailing good-nature. The younger chaps frankly envied him because he was at home amongst such a raft of captivating things; bats and balls and

mitts and rackets and running shoes and all the objects coveted by a small boy—and many a large one. Besides Tom himself, and, naturally, the partners in the firm, I think the person who took the most interest in the sporting goods department of Cummings and Wright's was Sidney Morris. Sidney had watched and advised and even helped unpack the goods and arrange them on the shelves and in the cases, and all the time had been filled with a fine enthusiasm and optimism. Sidney jeered at the idea of failure and bewailed the fate that kept him from taking his place beside Tom behind the counter.

"I'll just bet anything I could sell goods," he declared enviously. "Do you suppose Mr. Cummings would give me a place this summer, Tom?" [110]

"Why, you'll be going to the Lakes," said Tom. "You told me just the other day that you would."

Sidney scowled. "I won't if I can get out of it," he said. "I'd a heap rather stay here in town and help you. I wonder if Dad would let me!"

Handling the goods he did, it is not to be wondered at that Tom grew interested in athletic sports and events. Although he had never witnessed a baseball game, save such impromptu affairs as he had participated in with his mates at the country school, when the home plate was a flat rock stolen from the stone wall and the bases were empty tin cans or blocks of wood, nor seen an athletic meeting, nor had more than the haziest notion of what one did with a golf club, he nevertheless developed a keen interest in all these things and perused the sporting news in the papers with a fine devotion. At least he could talk understandingly about baseball and track and field sports, which was a handy thing, since the group of boys who got into the habit of meeting at the sporting goods counter in Cummings and Wright's were forever thrashing over those subjects. I don't mean that he offered opinions unsolicited, for that wasn't Tom's way. Nor did he ever affect knowledge he didn't possess. When he didn't understand a subject he let it alone. If appealed to on a point beyond him, he acknowledged his ignorance. The result was that when he did say anything fellows listened to him respectfully, and it came to be a settled conviction that if Tom Pollock said a thing was so, why, it was so! [110]

It was the one big regret of Tom's life in those days that he was not able to go out with the others and take part in their sports. He'd liked to have tried for the ball team, and seen what he could do over the hurdles or grasping a vaulting pole or putting one of the big iron shots. He'd even have liked to play golf! And all he knew about golf was that you hit a small white ball with a cruelly large-headed club, why or where to being beyond him! The nearest compensation came in the evenings after a hastily-eaten supper. Then he and Sidney, and sometimes a third or fourth fellow, took bat and ball to the vacant lot near Sidney's house and had a fine time as long as the spring twilight lasted. Tom had gone to the extravagance of purchasing for himself a catcher's mitt at wholesale price, and Sidney, who played left field on the high school team that spring and fancied himself a bit as a pitcher, would station Tom against the tumble-down fence and "put 'em over" to him. Sidney had more speed than skill, though, and Tom had lots of exercise reaching for wild ones. It was good practice, however, for Sidney and much fun for Tom. When other chaps showed up one of them would bat flies or grounders to the rest. Sometimes enough boys were present to permit of what they called "fudge," each taking his turn at fielding, playing first base, pitching, catching, and batting. Tom's enthusiasm for a recreation in which the rest might indulge at almost any time but which was forbidden to him, save at infrequent times, worked for proficiency and it wasn't long before he could knock up high flies or crack out hot liners as unerringly as the best. As for fielding, he soon acquired quite a local reputation, a fact which helped him in a business way, adding, as it did, to the authority on athletic affairs already popularly bestowed upon him. [111]

It was when he and Sidney were pitching and catching one evening that something occurred which had a far more important effect on Tom's fortunes—and, for that matter, on the fortunes of the Amesville High School Baseball Team—than either of the boys could have imagined in their wildest dreams. They happened to have the lot to themselves that evening, none of the other fellows having shown up, and Sidney had been thudding the ball against Tom's glove for some time. After every delivery Tom would return the ball at an overhand toss, as Sidney had instructed him to do. Presently, however, after a wild pitch had escaped him and he had had to chase back of the fence for it, he called to Sidney: [112]

"Sid, here you go. Watch my curve!"

Twisting his fingers around the ball as he had seen Sidney do times innumerable, he shot the ball away. He had no more expected the ball to really curve than he had expected it to take wings and go over the house-tops. But it did curve, most palpably! Moreover, it settled into Sidney's outstretched bare hands with such speed that Sidney, not prepared, promptly dropped it and shook a stinging palm.

"Where'd you get on to that?" he inquired in surprise. "That was a peach of an out! Here, give me another." And Sidney trotted to the fence. "Toss me your mitt." [113]

Pleasantly surprised, Tom walked down to the trampled spot where Sidney had stood and tried again. He tried many more times, in fact, and all to no purpose. The ball went swiftly enough, but it went perfectly straight, and all Tom's efforts to make it repeat its former erratic flight were in vain.

"That's funny, isn't it?" he asked breathlessly at last. "It curved before all right. You saw it, didn't you? Why doesn't it do it now, Sid?"

"Oh, you probably don't hold it the same way. Try again."

Tom tried until he was out of breath and every muscle in his arm ached, and all to no purpose except to amuse Sidney.

By that time it was too dark to see well and he gave it up for the time. When Sidney joined him he was frowning accusingly at the ball.

"I'll make you do it again," muttered Tom, "if I have to keep at it all summer. You just see if I don't!"

CHAPTER IX

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TOM WANTS TO KNOW

The next evening they were at it again. Sidney was able to pitch an out-curve and a drop and had besides what he called his "slow ball." The latter, however, didn't differ much, so far as Tom could see, from any other ball. Besides, Sidney's slow ball was an uncertain affair since it didn't always materialise when he expected it to. Of course Sidney was willing and even eager to show Tom what he knew, but, unfortunately, Sidney didn't know a great deal about the art of pitching a baseball, and what he did know he found it very difficult to expound. He showed Tom how to hold his fingers around the ball to deliver an out-curve, but as the "snap" and the "follow-through" have an immense effect on the ball's flight, Tom's efforts weren't very successful. Still, he did manage, after awhile, to impart an out-curve to the ball and got so he could do it perhaps four times out of ten. The other times the ball generally went wild. Sidney tried to tell him about the motion of his arm and letting the ball slide off the tips of the first two fingers, but Sidney wasn't very clear in his own head as to the philosophy of it, and so made a poor teacher. When Tom's arm was tired, Sidney took his place and practised his slow ball with no great success and afterward tried to fathom the intricacies of the in-curve. This, though, was too much for him.

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"I'm going to get Thorny Brooks to show me how to do it," he said finally. "He's got a dandy in-shoot. You ought to see him pitch, Tom."

"I'd like to," Tom answered. "Maybe some day when you're playing a game I'll get out and see it. I wish I could play, Sid."

"I know. It's too bad you can't. You'd make a good player, I'll bet. You can field and bat better than two or three fellows on the team right now. I don't suppose Cummings and Wright would let you off in the afternoon, would they?"

"Then I wouldn't be there at all," laughed Tom. "When do you fellows play your first game?"

"About two weeks from now. First games don't amount to much, though; they're only practices. You wait till we tackle Lynton High or Petersburg. Then you'll see real games!"

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They went back through the twilight, passing the ball between them as they walked, Sidney progressing backward and having several narrow escapes from colliding with poles, hydrants, and pedestrians. Afterward they sat on the front steps until the chill of evening drove them upstairs to Sidney's room. Then they "wirelessly," taking turns at examining each other on the Continental code with tablet and pencil and then ticking off on the practice key:

"Dash, dot, dash, dot, pause, dot, dash, pause, dash, dot, pause, dash, dot, dash, dash, pause, dash, dash, dash, pause, dot, dot, dash, pause, dot, dash, dash, dot, pause, dot, dot, pause, dash, pause, dash, dot, dash, dot, pause, dot, dot, dot, dot, pause, dot, dash, pause, dash, dot, pause, dash, dash, dash, pause, dot, dot, dash, pause, dash, pause, dot, dot, dot, pause, dot, dot, dot, dot, pause, dash, dash, dash, dash, pause, dash, dash, dash, pause, dash, pause, dot, dot, dash, dash, dot, dot."

But Tom, who was listening to the clicking key, was unusually stupid this evening. I think his mind was more on pitching a baseball than on telegraphy. He frowned uncertainly.

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"Can you pinch' something," he said. "I didn't get it."

"Pitch,' you chump! 'Can you pitch an out-shoot?'"

"Oh! Dash, dot—dash, dash, dash!"

Sidney laughed. "No! Here, you try me."

At ten o'clock they performed the regular procedure of getting the time and then Tom said good night and walked home through the quiet streets, briskly because the evenings were still chill, thinking much of the way about that elusive out-curve!

The next day he searched through the pile of little paper-clad volumes of the Athletic Library which were a part of his stock at the store and was lucky enough to find "How to Pitch a Base-Ball." In the interims of waiting on customers he studied the book. But it didn't seem just what he wanted. He got a ball and followed the directions given for holding it, alternately frowning over the text and his fingers, and wished he might pitch it and see what would happen. After awhile he quietly stole down to the basement, switched on the lights, and let drive at the partition that hid the plumbing shop. If the ball curved he didn't discern it. What he did discern was Jim Hobb's black head stuck through the doorway in the partition and Jim's incensed countenance.

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"Hi! What in thunder are you doing, Tom?"

"I threw a baseball."

"Well, you knocked a wrench off the shelf and nearly bust my hand open. You get out of here with your baseballs!"

Tom recovered the ball and returned upstairs disappointedly to find Mr. Wright fuming and fussing because Tom had left the counter and two small boys wanted to buy a catcher's mitt.

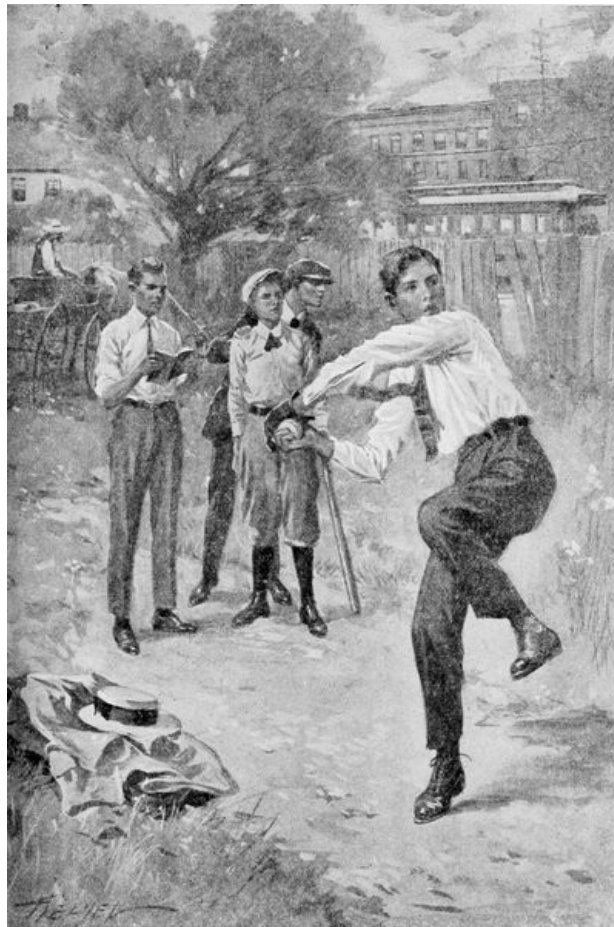
But that evening, after depositing a dime in the firm's treasury as the price of the handbook, Tom took "How to Pitch a Base-Ball" to supper with him, propped it against the sugar-bowl and, since the other boarders had gone and he had the dining-room to himself, studied it assiduously from soup to pie. So eager was he to practise the book's teachings that he took a car out to Alameda Avenue, instead of walking, and hailed Sidney at once to the vacant lot, exhibiting the volume on the way. Sidney was not greatly impressed with it.

"I don't believe you can learn how to pitch out of a book," he said pessimistically. "You have to—to just keep trying."

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"Of course you do, but you've got to know how to hold the ball, haven't you? This tells you how to do that, all right, only it isn't very plain. I thought if you'd read what it said, I'd try and do it. You see, when I try to read and fix my fingers at the same time, I always lose my place and get all mixed up."

So Sidney good-naturedly found the instructions for pitching an out-curve and read them off while Tom, frowning intently, curved his fingers about the ball. "[Grasp the ball firmly.](#)" recited Sidney, "[between the thumb and the first two fingers.](#)"



["Grasp the ball firmly."](#) recited Sidney, "[between the thumb and the first two fingers"](#)

"Uh-uh," grunted Tom.

"Hold the third and four fingers back toward the palm."

"All right."

"Bring the hand up over the shoulder in the usual manner——"

"What's the usual manner?" demanded Tom.

"Why, I suppose just as if you were going to throw the ball straight. 'The back of the hand being turned away from you.'"

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"Yes."

"In delivering the ball, bring the back of the hand underneath as the arm is dropped, letting the ball roll off the surface of the confining fingers, which imparts to it the rotary motion necessary to make it curve to the pitcher's left.' That sounds crazy to me!"

"Me too. But here goes!"

The ball shot away and the boys watched it eagerly. There was undoubtedly a slight tendency toward an out-curve, but certainly not enough to fool the stupidest batsman. But Tom was

pleased.

"That's the idea, all right," he declared jubilantly. "Now we'll try it again." Sidney obligingly recovered the ball, which, luckily, had struck the fence instead of going through any of the numerous holes in it. He tossed it to Tom, and Tom again carefully and thoughtfully arranged his fingers about it, poised it over his shoulder, and swept it forward. But this time something was very wrong, for the ball swooped down to earth some fifteen feet distant, struck an empty tin can, and bounded off into the street.

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"I'll chase it!" said Tom.

"No, you stay there," laughed Sidney, "and study about it. I'll get it."

"What I'd like to know," said Tom, when Sidney was back once more, "is what makes it curve."

"Why, it curves because you hold it so it will!"

"But why should it? Just because I hold it with two fingers instead of three or four, why should it curve to the left?"

"Because when you let go of it you—wait a minute!" Sidney found his place in the book. "Because you 'impart to it the rotary motion necessary to make it curve to the pitcher's left.'"

"Well, but *why*?"

"Oh, shut up," sighed Sidney. "You're too inquisitive. It—it just does, I suppose."

"Nothing 'just does' without a reason," replied Tom seriously. "And I'm going to find out why. Seems to me if I knew why a ball curves one time and doesn't curve another, I'd get the hang of it better. Read that stuff again, Sid."

This time—Eureka! A veritable out-curve plainly visible to the naked eye, as Sidney triumphantly announced. And after that two more in succession! And then something went wrong again and the ball acted quite foolishly.

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"You're tired, I guess," Sidney said. "Let me have a try while you rest up."

So Sidney "put over" a few out-curves, making the astounding discovery that he and the book were quite in agreement as to the manner of holding the ball—a fact which he had doubted before,—and subsequently tried a drop with fair success. That slow ball wouldn't materialise this evening. Then Tom sent Sidney to the fence with the mitt and tried again and again to make that obstinate leather-covered sphere do as he wanted it to. Once or twice it did, but the trouble was that Tom couldn't discover why it did; or why it more often didn't. Still, it could be done, and, moreover, he had done it, and that was something! Sidney wanted him to attempt an in-shoot or a drop or some of the other deliveries set forth in the book, but Tom shook his head.

"I'm going to learn that out-curve thing first," he said doggedly. "When I get so I can do that every time, I'll try a new one. Some day I'm going to be able to pitch 'em all. First, though, I'm going to find out why—why—"

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"Why is a curve," said Sidney helpfully.

"There's some reason. There must be. There's a perfectly good scientific reason for it, Sid."

"Huh! What if there is? I'll bet you won't be able to curve a ball any better for knowing why," jeered Sidney. "The way to learn to pitch is to pitch. Come on home."

CHAPTER X

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TOM PLAYS IN A REAL GAME

That spring proved to be the pleasantest in Tom's recollection. To be sure, lessons didn't always go easily; in fact, Tom had a fortnight of trouble when the first lazy, warm days came, and only extricated himself from his difficulties by resolutely remaining at home in the evenings and studying instead of playing ball. A slack time in the affairs of Cummings and Wright followed the first spring months and Tom was several times accorded the privilege of taking a couple of hours off on Saturday afternoons to watch the high school team play. He enjoyed that immensely, got terribly excited—although I must own that he didn't show the fact much—and "rooted" loyally for the Brown-and-Blue. The team that year was nothing to boast of, although patriotic youths did boast, for all of that, and met a larger number of defeats than was either expected or desired. Once Tom journeyed with some forty enthusiastic boys to Lynton, over in the next county, and returned very much depressed in the cool of a June twilight. But there were victories, too, and by the time school was over for the year Amesville High had redeemed itself after a fashion by decisively defeating Petersburg two out of three contests. The fact that Petersburg was woefully weak that year had much to do with the result of the series.

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Mr. Cummings seemed to sympathise with Tom's yearning for the diamond and more than once suggested an afternoon off when the local club was to play at home. The senior partner was something of a "fan" himself and followed the fortunes of the Cleveland and other major league clubs with great interest. He and Tom soon got into the habit of discussing baseball affairs in slack moments and he always handed the morning paper to the boy after he had read it.

"Fine game in Chicago yesterday, Tom," he would say. "Thirteen innings without a run!"

"Those White Sox have a great team this year, sir. I wouldn't be surprised to see them win the pennant, the way they're travelling now."

"Hm; yes, maybe. But Philadelphia will stand a lot of watching, son. They made a bad start, I know, but they're coming fast now."

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And then, if there were no customers awaiting Tom's attention, they would talk baseball for many minutes, Mr. Cummings leaning with an elbow on a showcase and gazing thoughtfully into the street and Tom tidying his stock behind the counter. Sometimes Mr. Wright would enter quickly and find them there, and then Mr. Cummings's efforts to appear busy were very amusing.

"I tell you, Tom, it's a fine thing to be able to hit over three hundred, but if you can't make time on the bases you might just as well bat around two hundred. Why, now you take— These are going pretty well, are they? That's good. Better not let your stock get too low."

And Tom, bewildered at the sudden turn of conversation, would glance around to find Mr. Wright frowning from the doorway. It became an understood thing between the senior partner and Tom that when Mr. Wright appeared they were each to simulate deep attention to business!

Tom finished his first year at high school with credit, attended the graduation exercises—he had already gone to a moonlight picnic given by the senior class—and thus, so to say, made his entrance into Society. He had been presented to numerous young ladies, always to his embarrassment, and had secretly wished he could dance. As he could not, he had watched the others rather enviously and had felt somewhat awkward and out of it. Sidney wanted to enlist the services of a girl friend in Tom's behalf. "She'll teach you in an hour, Tom. She's a wonder at it! What do you say?" But Tom had drawn back in unfeigned alarm and shaken his head with a vigour that had left no doubt in his chum's mind as to his meaning. All that summer one of the worst experiences that could happen to Tom was to meet on the street one of the girls he had been introduced to. More than once, discerning a young lady in the distance, he crossed over to the other sidewalk and became absorbed in the window displays. There was one awful occasion—Tom couldn't think of it without a shudder for weeks!—when he had encountered May Warner three blocks from the store and, in some mysterious way, had suddenly found himself walking beside her along the street. How it had happened he never did know, but it was certainly due to no effort on his part! The young lady, who was a very pretty girl of about his own age, had done most of the talking, Tom merely according an embarrassed "yes" or "no" now and then, but those were three of the longest blocks he had ever travelled. When they reached the doorway of Cummings and Wright's, Tom fled without ceremony. Naturally he soon gained a reputation for bashfulness, and the girls, instead of taking pity on him and letting him alone, seemed to go out of their way to speak to him, getting a good deal of amusement from poor Tom's unhappiness.

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Sidney was to leave Amesville for the summer the last of July, his often expressed desire to spend the warm weather in town failing to impress his parents. Tom knew he was going to miss Sidney a good deal and he looked forward regretfully to the latter's departure. Once, in June, Sidney accompanied Tom out to Derry to remain over Sunday and enjoyed the visit so much because of the novelty of it that he declared his intention of going again. Star had a fine time then, receiving more attention and petting than falls to the lot of most dogs in the short space of a day. Tom's uncle was as gracious to the visitor as he ever was to anyone, but Sidney secretly voted Farmer Bowles "an old curmudgeon." He got on finely with Aunt Patty, however. But for that matter Aunt Patty, in spite of her sharp tongue, would have been kind to a chimney-sweep had he been honoured with Tom's friendship.

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The high school baseball team disbanded after school closed, for many of its members went away in the summer. But this year a few of the fellows who were to remain at home formed themselves into the Amesville Blues, filling the vacant places on the team with boys of their acquaintance. Sidney held his place in left field while he remained in the city, and it was Sidney who proposed that Tom be made manager of the team. So it fell to Tom's lot to arrange games with rival nines in and out of town. This he did so well that the Blues played three times a week on an average and had a lot of good fun. They made short trips to neighbouring towns—the matter of railroad fares prohibited very long excursions—and once or twice Tom went with them. It was on one of these trips that Tom made his first entry into real baseball. Tommy Hughes, who was the regular centre fielder on the school team and filled the same position with the Blues, developed a bad case of stomach-ache on the way to Union Vale—he quite frankly owned to having put away three chocolate ice-cream sodas and half a dozen peaches!—and, as from motives of economy, the team had brought no substitute along, there was only one thing to do.

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"I may be all right after awhile," moaned Tommy, "but I couldn't play now if you gave me a thousand dollars. Let Tom take my place, Walt." (Walter White was captain and catcher.) "He can play fine, Tom can."

So Tom, squeezing himself into Tommy's suit and donning Tommy's blue stockings, went out into the glare of centre field and nervously waited, wondering whether he would muff the first ball that came into his territory. As a matter of fact, he did, allowing the Union Vales to tally two runs, but after that he had five chances and accepted them all, while at bat he made the very creditable showing of two hits for a total of three bases out of six times up. The Amesville Blues won that game handily, and Tom returned home filled with the joy of victory and a new enthusiasm for baseball.

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The last week in July, Tom accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Morris and Sidney to the station and saw them off for the summer. Of course he was pressingly invited to visit them at the Lake and spend

as much time as he could, and he even promised to do it, but in his heart he knew very well he couldn't afford it even if the opportunity in the shape of a summer vacation came to him. He felt rather lonely and downcast for several days after Sidney's departure. There were almost daily letters for awhile, and these helped a good deal. But presently the letters became less frequent and by that time Tom had in a measure reconciled himself to his friend's absence. Business at the store grew brisk in July and remained so all the summer. Tom didn't mention the subject of a vacation and didn't really very much care about having one. The trip to the Lake to visit Sidney, although the latter continually reminded him of his promise and wrote glowingly of the good times they could have, was quite out of the question. The fare there and return was over thirty dollars, and, while Tom was putting aside a little money every week, he was far from being a Cræsus. He finally wrote Sidney to that effect, received in due time a very disappointed epistle in reply, and felt more at ease now that the matter was finally decided. [132]

The sporting goods department did very well in the summer. There was something very like a "boom" in golf at Amesville and Tom did a good business in golf clubs, balls, and supplies. He had ventured on a line of rather expensive golf vests and sweaters, very stunning affairs they were, too, and was relieved to find that he could not only get rid of those he had ordered, but that it would be necessary to order more. Joe Gillig had taken a two-weeks' vacation in June, and Mr. Cummings frequently went away for week-ends, usually, as Tom discovered, managing to witness a ball game somewhere during his absence, but Mr. Wright and Tom stuck to the ship all during the hot weather. And it *was* hot that summer in Amesville! Tom ruined two boxes of golf-balls by exposing them to the rays of the sun that, intensified by the plate-glass window, caused the enamel to blister. He mentioned the matter in trepidation to Mr. Wright, the senior partner being out of town at the time, and had visions of being told to charge the two dozen balls to himself. But Mr. Wright, frowning and "tut-tutting," only said: "Ought to have known better, Tom; ought to have known better. Live and learn, though. Charge to profit and loss." [133]

Late in August, Sidney began to write of coming home in a fortnight or three weeks, and about that time business slackened up a little. Mr. Cummings said one morning: "Tom, how about taking a vacation? I guess we can get along without you for a week or two after the first of the month. You haven't been here quite a year yet and so we can't give you full pay, but you can have a week with wages and another week without if you want it."

So Tom chose to limit his vacation to one week. He went out to Derry one Saturday evening and remained until Tuesday. By that time he began to miss the town and so he moved back. The next morning he dropped in at the store, talked baseball with Mr. Cummings and hobnobbed awhile with Joe, and then went out to loiter rather aimlessly along the street. While he was studying the enticing placards outside the Empire Theatre and wondering whether to invest a dime and witness the moving pictures inside, someone slapped him on the shoulder and he glanced around to find Thornton Brooks grinning at him. Thorny Brooks had graduated from high school in the spring and was a big, fine-looking chap of eighteen. He had played with the Blues as pitcher, and Tom had become fairly well acquainted with him. [134]

"Going in?" asked Thorny.

Tom looked undecided.

"Come on! It's my treat. They've got some dandy pictures this week. I've seen 'em once, but I can stand 'em again."

So Tom allowed the older boy to pull him up to the window and finally through the turnstile. They found seats in the back of the house, and Tom had his first glimpse of moving pictures. They seemed very wonderful to him and when, presently, a film showing a game of baseball at the Polo Grounds in New York was thrown on the screen he almost got out of his seat in his eagerness. Thorny, with the superior knowledge of one to whom moving pictures are an old story and who has seen the present programme before, explained to his companion in whispers.

"That's Lewis at bat," said Thorny. "Now watch. See him swing at that? Plain as day, isn't it? There's a hit. Watch him streak to first! That's Murray fielding the ball in to second. That was a peach of a base-hit, eh? I don't know who this chap is. He's a big one, though. One ball! A foul! He's got it! No, he hasn't either! Look at the crowd in the stands, Tom. Now watch the fellow on first. There he goes!" [135]

"He's out!" exclaimed Tom in a hoarse and agitated whisper as the runner slid into second and the shortstop swung at him with the ball in hand.

"No, sir!" said Thorny triumphantly. "He's safe! See that? That was some steal, eh? A close decision, though. I wonder who that umpire on bases is? I'd hate to be in his shoes, wouldn't you?"

Tom agreed that he would, keeping meanwhile his eyes glued to the quivering drama before him. The batsman popped up a high foul, the New York catcher got under it, the batsman walked toward the bench in disgust, and the picture faded. Others followed, however, and Tom enjoyed them all hugely. It was long after noon when the boys emerged from the little theatre, bathed in perspiration. On the way back toward the centre of town Thorny said: [136]

"We play the Red Sox this afternoon over by the railroad. Coming over to see it?"

"Yes," Tom answered. "We got licked Monday, didn't we?"

Thorny shrugged his broad shoulders in disgust.

"Why wouldn't we? We had only six of our regulars. A chap named Squires or something was

playing third and he never made a put-out once during the game. Say, Tom, why don't you play in the field for us to-day? Then we can put Hobbs on third. Will you?"

"I'd like to," said Tom eagerly, "if you want me to."

"Surest thing you know, kid! That's all right, then. I'll tell Walter. We'll need to put up a corking game to-day if we're going to lick those toughies over there. Don't forget. Three o'clock!"

Tom played in right field that afternoon, made no errors, and had three hits and one run to his credit. The Red Sox won their game, 7 to 5, however. On the way back Walter White, who captained the Blues, said:

"Can you go over to Lynton with us Saturday, Pollock? Wish you would. You played a dandy game to-day; didn't he, Thorny?"

"Sure! The kid's a ballplayer, that's what he is. He'll come; won't you, Tom?"

"If you want me," said Tom.

"We sure do! Wish you might have played all summer with us," replied White. "You've got a fine eye for the ball. That two-bagger of yours was as clean a wallop as I've seen for a long time!"

"And that red-headed pitcher of theirs," sighed Thorny, "was no cinch! I couldn't find him at all!"

"We're going over by trolley at half-past one," said White. "Meet at Main and Ash, Pollock. Don't be late, will you?"

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CHAPTER XI

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THE BLUES VISIT LYNTON

The Lynton team still fought under the high school banner, although, like the Amesville team, it had been weakened by the absence of several of its good players. Few if any of the ten youths who journeyed to the neighbouring town that Saturday afternoon expected to win the game, for earlier in the year the Lynton team had defeated them quite decisively; and at that time they had possessed all the strength of the regular high school line-up, whereas to-day the nine was rather a makeshift affair.

But, after all, the main thing was to play baseball and have a good time, and, consequently, it was a happily irresponsible group that took possession of the two last seats of the big yellow electric car at Main and Ash streets at twenty minutes to two and went whizzing across country at a good thirty miles an hour, swaying and bouncing along an air-line track that dipped into vales and climbed hills with a fine disregard of grades.

There was Thorny Brooks, who pitched, and Walter White, who caught him, and Tommy Hughes, who played centre field, and "Buster" Healey, who held down first, and six other lads of varying ability, size, and age, including Tom himself and a grammar-school youngster named Peddie, who was a distant cousin of White's and who, volunteering for the position, had been accorded the office of bat-boy and general outfield substitute. He was a nice-looking, fresh-faced kiddie of fourteen, whose pleasure at accompanying the team was very evident. Going over, White and Thorny Brooks arranged the batting-list, after much discussion, and Tom was given the honour of third place.

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"You're a pretty good hand with the stick," explained the captain, "and if Buster or I get on bases you may be able to work us along or bring us in. Did anyone bring a score-book?"

George Peddie blushing produced one from a hip-pocket and the batting-list was copied into it, no easy task with the big car apparently trying its best to jump the rails! They reached Lynton, an overgrown sort of village surrounded by truck farms, at a few minutes past two. A walk of a few blocks brought them to the field, where, as the game was not to begin until three, they put in a good half-hour of practice. It was a warm day, but not excessively hot. Already there was a hint of autumn in the intense blue of the sky and the fresher feeling of the little breeze that crept across the neatly tilled fields. After they had had all the work Walter White thought good for them they were called in and ranged themselves along the scarred benches that stood in the shade of a grandstand. By ones or twos or in little groups the spectators began to arrive, and at a quarter to three the Lynton team came on. Several of them walked over and shook hands with Walter and Thorny and others of the visitors and conversed a few moments. The matter of choosing an umpire was soon arranged, Lynton offering a choice of either of two high school teachers. Then Lynton took the field to warm up and Thorny, pulling on his glove and picking up a ball, called for someone to catch him.

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"You'll do, Tom. Come on out here."

So Tom borrowed Walter's big glove and stood up in front of the stand. At first Thorny's pitches were easy to handle, but as he began to warm up Tom found the ball more difficult to judge. Several times he was badly fooled by the pitcher's elusive drops, while his out-shoot was so extreme that Tom more than once moved to the right only to have the ball bring him sidling back again. Thorny was amused.

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"Fool you, do they, Tom?" he asked.

Tom smiled and nodded. "I'm glad I don't have to bat them," he said.

The Blues went to bat first and both Buster Healey and Walter White reached first, Buster on balls and the captain on a clean hit between first and second that advanced Buster to second. Then Tom faced the Lynton pitcher, who had something of a local reputation in his line, with misgivings. Down at second Buster danced and ran back and forth. At first, Walter took a good ten-foot lead. "Hit it out, Pollock!" he called encouragingly. "He hasn't a thing on the ball!"

But the Lynton pitcher had enough on it to puzzle Tom, and Tom, after knocking two fouls back of third, hit straight into the pitcher's glove and the pitcher, whirling quickly, caught Walter a yard off the base. The next batsman made the third out and the teams changed places. Lynton didn't even get a man to first in that inning, nor did the Blues do any better in their half of the next. In fact, nothing much happened until the fourth inning, when Lynton managed to get a man to second on a clean hit and then, with two out, brought him home with a teasing Texas Leaguer that fell midway between shortstop and centre fielder. So far Tom, in left field, had had no work to do, while at bat he had twice failed to make a hit.

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The Blues came back in the first of the fifth and, by a lucky infield hit that bounded meanly, placed a runner on the first bag. Tommy Hughes sacrificed with a long fly to right and put the runner on third. A moment later the score was tied when one of the tail-enders made a slashing wallop over second baseman's head. At one to one the teams battled along until the seventh. Then ill-fortune took a hand in affairs. The Lynton third baseman caught a slow ball on his bat and smashed it straight at Thorny. The latter might readily have been excused for jumping away from it and leaving it for second baseman to handle, but instead of that he tried to knock it down—catching it was almost out of the question—and succeeded. But the ball caught him squarely on his throwing wrist and in the agony of the pain Thorny was unable to get it to first in time to head off the runner. Time was called while Walter White went down and rubbed the injured hand, and presently Thorny went on again. But after he had pitched a few more balls the wrist began to swell and stiffen and his offerings became very easy for the enemy. For the rest of that inning smart fielding delayed the inevitable, and, although Lynton got a runner on third and another on first, they died there.

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Thorny walked rather dejectedly to the bench and his team-mates clustered anxiously about him and viewed the swollen wrist.

"Cold water is what you want there," said Tommy Hughes. "Who's got a handkerchief?"

When one was forthcoming Tommy wet it at the water pail and bound it around the wrist.

"It feels good," said Thorny, "but I don't believe I'll be able to pitch any more, fellows. I'm awfully sorry. I ought to have let that pesky ball go by. It was coming about a mile a minute. Can't you finish the game out, Buster?"

"Me?" Buster looked startled. "Gee, I couldn't pitch anything those fellows wouldn't make mince-meat of!"

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"I'll try it," said Walter doubtfully, "if you'll go behind the bat, Buster."

"Then who'll take first?"

"Move Sanborn over from third and let Tommy take Sanborn's place," suggested Thorny. "Then put young Peddie in centre."

"All right. Can you bat this inning? You're up after Tommy."

"Yes, I'll take another whack at it," said Thorny. "What we've got to do, fellows, is make a few runs. They won't do a thing to us now. No offence to you, Walt."

"Oh, I know it," said Walter sadly. "They'll everlastingly knock me all around the lot. I'm not going to try to work any curves on them, Thorny. My curves are fine, only they don't go over. I'll give 'em straight balls and trust to luck. That umpire's pretty easy on the pitcher. You're up, Tommy. Go on. There's one down. Try to lay down a bunt along the third-base line, Tommy, and run like thunder."

Tommy followed directions so well, even to running "like thunder," that he got safely to the first sack, the third baseman coming in hurriedly for the ball and heaving it over the first baseman's head.

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"If he'd been watching he could have gone on to second," grumbled Walter. "You're up, Thorny. Send him along, old man."

Thorny had not made a hit so far. Realising that he would have no other chance to-day, he went very determinedly to the plate and swung his bat. For a pitcher Thorny was a very fair batter, although to-day he certainly had not proved it. But a hit was due him and he got it. Letting three offerings go by, two of them balls and one a called strike, he picked out the fourth and "took it on the nose." Away it went into short left. Tommy scuttled to second like a hunted rabbit and Thorny made first. There he called to Walter and there was a conference. Then Buster was called to run for the injured one and Sanborn walked to the plate. The Lynton pitcher made three attempts to catch Buster off the bag, possibly in the hope that Tommy would attempt to steal third and get thrown out there. But Buster was too quick for a right-handed pitcher. Sanborn began to pop up fouls and put every Amesville player's heart in his mouth half a dozen times. But both catcher and third baseman just managed to miss the ball at every attempt and Sanborn, with two strikes and one ball on him, was still safe. Then came the signal for a hit-and-run and Sanborn swung

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madly at an out-shoot that cut the corner of the plate waist-high. By some trick of good luck he connected and the ball went flying toward first baseman. But between him and the oncoming ball dashed Buster Healey on his way to second and that was just enough to confuse the baseman momentarily. He got the ball on a high bound, dropped it, picked it up again, and raced for his base. Over at third, Tommy, never stopping, spurned the bag under foot and raced for the plate. Cries from the Lynton catcher and half the Lynton team filled the air. Too late to make his out at first, the baseman turned, recovered himself, and hurled the ball home. It went wide of the plate by five feet, Tommy was safe, Buster was on third, and Sanborn was sliding, feet-foremost, into second, where an agonised shortstop implored the catcher to send the ball to him!

Amesville cheered and jumped in front of the bench and Tommy, patting the dust from his clothes and grinning, was thumped ecstatically on the back. When his team-mates had got through with him you couldn't have found a speck of dust anywhere on him! There was still only one gone and runners on second and third. But the tail-end of the Blue's batting list was up and the outlook wasn't very bright. Still, sometimes the unexpected happens, and it happened to-day. Little Smith, the weakest batter on the nine, although a remarkably clever shortstop, connected with the first ball pitched and drove it far into centre field. He was so surprised that he just stood there and held his bat until Walter yelled to him to run. However, running did him no good, for centre fielder was easily under the fly and Smith was out. But Buster Healey was ambling home and Sanborn was streaking it for the plate. The ball began its homeward flight just as Sanborn rounded third and it was a narrow squeak for him. But he made it, or so the umpire declared, and that was enough. The score stood four to one now and Amesville dared to hope that, even without the further services of Thorny, she might hold her own and take a victory home with her. The inning ended a few minutes later without further scoring and the Blues put their new line-up in the field. Lynton howled gleefully when she saw Walter walk over to the pitcher's box and pick up the ball. Young Peddie, almost trembling with excitement, scooted out to centre field and the other changes were made as Thorny had suggested.

Perhaps Lynton expected Walter to offer her something puzzling and so for awhile was at a loss to fathom his sort of pitching. At any rate, he managed to dispose of the first batsman easily, causing him to pop up a weak infield fly that settled cosily into Sanborn's glove. But after that, the head of the Lynton batting-list coming up, the trouble began. Walter's straight balls were fine for fattening batting averages! The only variation he attempted was in height, and he not always succeeded there. At all events, high, low, or medium, his offerings met ready acceptance and soon the fielders were very busy. Tom got his first chance in left field and made a brilliant catch after running half-way across the field. The infield scurried about like a lot of mice and the crack of bat against ball became terribly monotonous to the wearers of the blue stockings. Poor Walter stood up to it bravely, a rather sickly smile on his face, and fed his offerings to the delighted enemy. Before anyone realised it the bases were filled. To be sure, there were two out by that time, but that didn't deter Lynton any. A hit past shortstop, and a runner came in. An error by Sanborn at first, and another run trickled over the plate. A smashing drive that was too hot for third baseman to handle left men on second and first. But Lynton's best batsmen had passed now and the trouble was over, as it proved. A nice low ball was selected by the batter and it went far and high into centre field. The Blues, watching, groaned. For in centre stood young Peddie, his eyes fixed on the arching sphere and eagerness and excitement in every line of his tense poise. Tom dug across in the hope of making the catch, but there was no time for him to get under it. Down it came, while the bases were emptied, and up went Peddie's hands. Then the miracle happened! The ball descended squarely into the fielder's glove and, to the astonishment and joy of the Blues, actually stuck there! The side was out!

Peddie was a hero and every fellow said nice things to him and thumped him on the back, just as they had thumped Tommy Hughes, and caused him to blush like a girl in pleasure and embarrassment.

And Amesville, accepting that piece of good fortune as an augury, went to bat in the first of the ninth quite hopefully.

CHAPTER XII

"BATTER'S OUT"

Amesville was still in the lead with one run, the score being 4 to 3, when Buster Healey strode to the plate with a confident swagger and tapped his bat determinedly. But pride goeth before a fall, and it took just two deliveries to dispose of the head of the Blue's batting-list. A nice fast ball swept past him, breast-high, and the umpire announced a strike. Buster smiled scornfully. Again the Lynton pitcher wound up and sped the sphere forward and this time Buster liked what was coming and swung for it. But the ball was a drop and Buster's bat slid over the top of it and the ball trickled some three feet in front of the plate. Buster lit out for the bag, but the ball reached it while he was still only half-way along the path and he turned disgustedly toward the bench.

The Lynton supporters in the stand, a noisy two or three hundred in all, howled their glee and the umpire called "Batter up, please!"

That meant Walter White, and Walter, realising that in all probability his team would have no other chance to add to their total, took his place and faced the pitcher coolly and craftily. He

meant to get to first somehow. Once there, he would trust to his speed or to Tom or Tommy Hughes to bring him home. The first delivery was wide of the plate, and Amesville, on the bench, shouted derisively. Walter swung his bat back and forth over the plate in an effort to disconcert the pitcher. Another ball went by.

"That's the stuff, Walt!" called Thorny. "Make him pitch, old man!"

Then came an out-shoot that went for a strike and a foul that fell harmlessly in the stand and put the score two and two. A trace of anxiety crept into Walter's face as he awaited the next offering. The pitcher was very deliberate, wrapping his fingers about the ball with more than ordinary care and giving the impression that he was about to offer one of his most eccentric curves. But what really came was a fast ball, high and straight over the centre of the plate. That was enough for Walter. Around came his bat, there was a sharp *crack*, and the ball streaked across the diamond, past shortstop, who made a gallant and desperate effort to reach it, and well into the outfield. Walter stood triumphantly on first and Amesville shouted joyfully. [153]

Tom knew that Walter would steal if he got half a chance and so he allowed the first ball to pass unconcernedly. It was high and wide, for the catcher expected the Blue's captain to try for second. But Walter knew better than to try a steal on the first delivery. Then came a strike, a drop that settled down knee-high as it reached the plate. It was likely then, Tom reasoned, that the pitcher would pitch another ball, probably a wide one, in the hope of making him reach out for it. And Tom's guess was the right one, for that is just what he did. And the score was one and two. On first base, Walter leaped and shouted, and from the bench came encouraging cries.

"He's up in the air, Tom!" "Wait for your base! He can't put 'em over!"

Then, as the Lynton pitcher wound up again, Tom got the signal from Walter. The ball floated lazily toward him, dropping slowly as it came. "There he goes!" shouted the Lynton infield, and Walter was sprinting for second. Tom swung hard at the ball, missed it cleanly, and heard it thud into the catcher's mitten. He knew enough not to step out of the way and so held his place stolidly at the plate while the Lynton catcher, tossing off his mask, side-stepped and hurled the ball to second. But there was desperation in Walter's effort and he had hooked one foot into the base before the shortstop swung down at him. After that Tom was free to do as he liked and he refused the next delivery and the umpire endorsed his judgment by calling it a ball. He began then to hope that he might get his base as a gift, but with three balls against him the Lynton pitcher settled down and curved one over the corner of the plate and Tom never even offered at it. He felt rather cheap as he walked back to the bench under the hoots of the audience. [154]

"Hard luck," said Tommy as he passed to take his turn. Tom seated himself and watched Tommy's efforts. Tommy had a strike called on him, popped a foul back of third baseman, and then let go at the next ball and hit safely through second baseman, advancing Walter to third. But the next batsman was young Peddie and, after swinging wildly at the first three balls offered him, he and the side retired together. [155]

Lynton started their half of the ninth with a vast amount of confidence and a very evident intention of pulling the game out of the fire. Nevertheless, Walter managed to strike out the first batsman, and, with the weak hitters coming up, it seemed that possibly, after all, the Blues might win out. But the next man got his base on balls and jogged to second a moment later when a wild pitch got by Buster and rolled to the fence. That seemed to be Walter's undoing, for after that he was as wild and uncontrolled as a hawk. With one strike and three balls on the second batsman, he made a desperate effort to put a low one across and managed to hit the man in the leg. By that time the stand was in an uproar and Walter began to show nervousness. The next batter hit safely and the bases were filled. Behind the Blues' captain the infield were doing their best to encourage him and pull him together.

"Take your time, Walt! Lots o' time! Let him hit it!" "You're doing fine, old man! Don't let 'em worry you! Put over a few; we're here!"

But Walter's arm had lost what little cunning it had possessed. Now and then he managed to get a ball over the plate, and when he did a rude Lynton batsman would rap it. Even the very tail-enders were hitting him now and in a trice the tying run came in and the bases were still full, with but two out. Walter faced the next batter desperately, got Buster's signal, and let drive. It was a wild effort and only by dropping flat on the ground was Buster able to stop the ball and keep the man on third from racing home. When he got to his feet again he turned to the umpire and asked for time. Then, amidst the jeering shouts of the audience, he walked down to the box. [156]

"Look here, Walt," he said quietly, "you're all in. If we can keep the score tied up, we may win in the next inning. Isn't there any other fellow who can pitch a little!"

Walter looked hopelessly about the field and shook his head. "I don't believe so. Most any of them could do better than I'm doing now, though, I guess." He called to Smith and that youth joined them.

"Smithie, can you pitch at all?" asked Walter.

Smith shook his head. "I suppose I could shy the ball somewhere near the plate, but I guess that's about all. Say, Pollock can pitch a little. I've seen him working with Sid Morris. He isn't much, I guess, but he has something on it. Why don't you give him a chance, Walt? He'd do a heap better than I could, anyway." [157]

"Tom Pollock!" Walter shouted and waved to where Tom was sitting on his heels over in left. "Come in here!" Then, turning to Buster: "You go back to first and I'll catch again. I can do that," he added disgustedly, "if I can't pitch. Say, Pollock," he went on as Tom trotted up, "can you

pitch any?"

Tom hesitated, a trifle startled. "Why, I don't know," he answered doubtfully. "I suppose I can, a little."

"Well, for goodness' sake, go in and get us through the inning if you can. These fellows are weak batters. If you've got anything at all, you can fool them. Know any signals?"

Tom shook his head. Walter turned his back to the enemy and walked Tom aside. "What can you pitch?" he asked.

"Nothing but an out-curve and a straight ball," answered Tom apologetically.

"That's good enough. Now, here," Walter laid a finger of his right hand over his glove. "One finger; see? A straight, low ball. Two fingers, a straight high one. Four fingers, a wide ball. Five fingers, an out-shoot. Get that? You watch my fingers before you pitch; see? And if you can't make 'em out shake your head. Now, then, what are the signals?" [158]

Tom repeated them and Walter gave him an encouraging slap on the back. "You'll do, Pollock. Don't be afraid of them. Watch the signals and try to give me what I ask for." And Walter walked back to the plate, tossed the ball to Tom, and donned his mask again.

Tom wished for a minute that he were many miles away. The few hundred persons in the stand suddenly looked like a thousand and their derisive laughter and shouted comments made his ears tingle. Behind him, as he drew his cap down firmly and hitched up his trousers—not because there was any danger of their slipping down, but because he had seen Thorny do it—his teammates spoke encouragingly and cheerfully.

"That's the stuff, Pollock! Show 'em what you can do!" "Remember, Tom, we're here right behind you! Take your time, old man!"

The batsman stepped out of the box and Tom sent half a dozen balls to Walter to limber his arm up. In spite of an attempt to put them over the plate, they went everywhere and Tom's heart sank as Walter reached this way and that to pull them in. If he didn't do better than that against the batsman, he'd make a frightful mess of it! At last, "Play ball!" said the umpire. [159]

The batsman stepped back into the box, grinning and tapping his bat against the plate, and Tom looked to Walter for the signal, trying hard not to see the faces of the onlookers in the stand nor to hear their sarcastic comments and advice. Walter held one finger extended earthward under cover of his big mitt as he crouched behind the batter, the signal for a low ball. The batsman was a tall, weedy youth and a knee-high offering was likely to get by him. Tom gripped the ball, fixed his gaze on the lower point of Walter's body protector, raised his hand well back and swung it forward. Walter leaped a yard to the right and saved the day, for the ball was intent on tearing a hole in the stand. Shouts and hoots and the thumping of feet came from the seats, and Tom, with sinking heart, tried to hide his embarrassment by picking up a pebble and tossing it away, just as he had seen Thorny do. Then the ball came back to him. [160]

"Take it easy, Pollock!" called Walter cheerfully. "Right across now, old man!"

But his fingers called for an out-curve and, with fear and mental trembling, Tom wrapped his thumb and first two fingers about the dirt-stained ball. Back went his arm overhead, up came his left foot, forward swept the hand, turning palm-uppermost as it descended, away went the ball, and Tom, crouching after the throw, watched anxiously. Straight for the batsman sped the ball and then, suddenly, as though responding to a sudden change of mind, it "broke" to the left, the batsman swung and missed, and Walter snuggled the sphere in his big mitt. It was the most pronounced break Tom had ever seen on his efforts, and a vast relief and encouragement came to him. If he could make that out-shoot go, he could certainly put a straight ball where it was wanted! "Strike one!" announced the umpire. The Blues broke into expressions of approval and satisfaction.

"That's the stuff, Tom! You've got him swinging like a gate!" "He couldn't see it, old man! You've got the stuff, all right, all right! Show it to him!" "Fine pitching, Pollock! Keep it up!" [161]

Walter signalled for a high ball over the plate and this time Tom sent it swift and true. The batsman stepped back, hesitated, and swung—and again missed!

"Strike two!" droned the umpire, and, "Two and two, Pollock! Keep at him!" shouted Walter.

A low ball followed and the batsman disdained it. Unfortunately so did the umpire. Walter looked his disgust. "Hard luck," he called as he tossed the ball back. "It was a dandy, Pollock. Let's have another just like it!"

On the bases the waiting runners jumped and scurried and shouted, and back of first and third bases leathern-lunged coachers shot a cross-fire past Tom's ears. "Some pitcher, what, Billy?" called the fellow behind third. "Used to pitch for the Gas House Team, he did! Watch that wind-up! Ain't it a peach? He's got everything there is—not!"

"Here we go! Here we go!" chanted the fellow at first. "Watch for a homer, fellows! Don't tire yourselves running; just walk in! Now! now! now! Hi! hi! hi! There it is!" [162]

Then the coachers' voices were suddenly stilled, for the batter had swung at an out-curve and missed it by a good three inches, and Tom Pollock had made his first strike-out! That was worth living for, that moment! Tom wondered if the others, the fellows about him and the noisy crowd in the stand, could guess the feeling of absolute rapture that was his as the bat swept harmlessly over the ball. Something was singing inside him and there was a delicious tingle in his fingers

and toes. He had pitched in a real game and struck out a batsman! He felt very, very proud and happy just then, and not a little astonished, too. He wished that Sidney might have been there to see it!

Then a new batter faced him at the plate, the ball was in his glove again, and once more Walter was stooping and giving his signal. The next batsman, perhaps from having watched Tom's delivery, was more canny. Two deliveries went as balls. Then he swung and missed a high one. After that he spoiled two perfectly good offers by fouling, and, with the score two and two, found one to his liking and cracked it far into centre field. In raced the runner from third, around the bases sped the others, and far and high arched the tiny ball against the blue afternoon sky. Tom turned and watched with his heart in his mouth. Out there Tommy Hughes was trotting confidently back. Then down settled the ball, up went Tommy's hands, and the inning was over!

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CHAPTER XIII

TOM TWIRLS TO VICTORY

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The shadows were lengthening when the first half of the tenth inning began and were not much longer when it was over. The Lynton pitcher came back strong, and Sanborn and Smith and one other went out in order without seeing first base. Then the teams once more changed places, and Walter and Thorny walked to the base-line with Tom, counselling, encouraging, instructing.

"Hold 'em this inning, Tom, and we've got 'em. Our best batters will be up next time and we'll get a run or two as sure as shooting! Just take your time and don't get flustered, old man. And follow the signals."

Lynton's head of the list faced him now and Tom knew that he would prove no such easy victim as the two last hitters. Walter, confident and cheerful of voice, stooped behind the swinging bat.

"All right now, fellows. First man! Make it be good, Tom!"

Tom followed the signals that Walter gave him, sometimes doubting the catcher's wisdom, but always doing his best to send what was asked for. The Lynton batsman, however, was canny and experienced and two balls were called before he offered at anything. Then it was a deceptive out-shoot that went by at the height of his shoulder and he missed it. But after that Tom couldn't find the plate and the batsman trotted smiling to first. Tom made one attempt to catch him off the bag, but throwing to first is something that requires much practice and Tom had never tried to before. The result was that he neglected to step out of the box, there were frantic and eager cries from the opponents, and the umpire waved the runner to second. Tom had made a balk. After that, only dimly comprehending in what way he had offended against the rules, he refrained from paying any attention to the runners on bases.

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The second batter fell a victim to a high, straight ball, which went up from his bat and landed in shortstop's eager hands. The third man proved a harder proposition, for he knocked innumerable fouls all over the place, after Tom had wasted two balls on him, and refused to have his fate settled. Eventually, however, he rolled a slow one toward third and was out at first. His sacrifice, though, had put the first runner on the last sack and Lynton in the stand chanted lustily in an endeavour to rattle the Blues' battery. But Walter worked carefully and Tom, following instructions, launched a low ball that was called a strike, a high one, outside, that went as a ball, an out-shoot that found the batsman napping and went as a second strike, and a straight, fast one that cut the plate squarely in the centre, but was several inches too low. Then, with the score two and two, a low ball met the tip of the bat and went up and out into right field and straight down into the fielder's hands, and another inning had passed into history and the score was still 4 to 4.

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Then Buster grabbed a bat and faced the Lynton hurler. The first delivery was a strike. Then came two balls, followed by a foul tip that smashed against the back-stop and made the second strike. The next offer looked good from the bench, but Buster disdained it, and when it crossed the plate it was so low that the umpire called it a ball. It was up to the pitcher then to put one across, and he did so. Or, rather, it would have gone across if Buster had not swung easily and sent it singing over pitcher's head and into short centre for a base.

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The Blues on the bench shouted and cavorted, and Thorny hustled over to third to coach, and Tommy, back of first, pawed the earth and made as much noise as a steam whistle! Walter White was up and the Lynton pitcher for once looked a little dismayed and nervous. Buster caused all sorts of trouble on first and the pitcher wasted much energy trying to catch him napping. But Buster, although he took daring leads, somehow always managed to scurry back to safety before the ball slapped into first baseman's hands. And all the time Tommy, leaping and waving his arms, shouted a rigmarole of ridiculous advice which no sensible base runner would ever have heeded and which Buster payed no attention to.

"That's the boy!" shouted Tommy. "Down with his arm! Up with his foot! Slide! Slide! *Whee-ee!* Safe on second! Look out! Whoa, Bill! Now you're off! Run, you rabbit! Whoa! Never touched him! Twenty minutes, Mr. Umpire! There he goes! Watch him, watch him! Hi! hi! hi! hi! Take a lead, Buster, take a lead! He can't throw this far! All right! Up again! How was that for a balk, Mr. Umpire? All right, Buster, he didn't see it. Off you go. That's good! Hold it! On your toes, boy, on your toes! Now you're off!"

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And meanwhile Thorny, behind third, was adding his voice to the uproar and the Lynton pitcher, finally giving up Buster as a bad job, directed his attention to the batsman and sent in three balls, one after another! Then a strike was called and then there was another ball and Walter trotted to first and Buster cavorted to second.

It was Tom's turn again. As thus far he had failed to connect with the ball, and as he was a pitcher and therefore supposed to be a weak batsman, the Lynton battery made the mistake of trying to put him out of the way expeditiously with straight balls. Tom let two strikes get by him before he realised that he was being offered perfectly good balls with little or nothing on them. Then he took a good deep breath into his lungs, gripped his bat more firmly, and swung at the next delivery. Bat and ball met squarely and pandemonium reigned while Buster tore around from second and Walter made for third. For the ball, arching gently, was on its way into centre field, quite safe from either left fielder or centre fielder. It was the latter who got it finally on the bound and hurled it back to second base. But by that time Buster had scored, Walter was on third, and Tom was doubling back to first base and safety. [169]

Perhaps Tommy had wearied himself overmuch in the coacher's box. At all events, he failed miserably to live up to expectations, popping a short fly into pitcher's hands. Young Peddie was the next up and the inning was as good as over, or should have been. But it is the unexpected that makes baseball what it is, and it was the unexpected that happened now. In some mysterious way, after swinging wildly and hopelessly at two wide ones and by the merest good luck refusing to notice a drop that went as a ball, Peddie managed to get his bat in front of a straight high ball. The ball trickled off the willow and went midway between the plate and the pitcher's box. Off raced Peddie toward first and in raced Walter from third. It was the pitcher who finally fielded the ball, although the catcher had started after it, too. Perhaps the pitcher forgot for the moment that there were two out when he saw Walter scuttling to the plate. At any rate, what he did, instead of throwing to first for an easy out, was to make a frantic and hurried toss to the plate. The catcher, not expecting it, was out of position to take the ball, and, although he did manage to get it, he was a yard away from the rubber and it was an easy trick for Walter to slide around behind him and score. [170]

The game was won then and there, as it afterward proved. Tom reached third in the confusion and when Sanborn came to bat a minute later the Lynton pitcher and, in fact, the whole Lynton team, was up the air with a vengeance. Sanborn connected with an in-shoot and third baseman fumbled it. When he recovered the ball Sanborn was nearly to first and the baseman's throw was hurried and wild. Sanborn kept on to second while first baseman chased back toward the fence for the ball, Tom scurried home, and young Peddie went to third. With the bases full, even with two out, the Blues' chance of adding more runs to their tally seemed excellent. But Smith was over-anxious and when, finally, after spoiling four good ones, he started the ball away it went slowly down to second base and Peddie was caught off the bag. [171]

It only remained now for Tom to hold the advantage of three runs, and this Tom managed to do, even though Lynton showed a strong disposition to "come back" hard in her half of the tenth. Two hits were made off Tom and a runner got as far as third. Tom showed unsteadiness for the first time and it took all Walter's skill to pull him through a bad situation when, with only one out and two on bases, one of Lynton's best batters faced him. But Fortune stood by the Blues. A long fly made the second out and let in only one run, and Tom and his team-mates breathed easier. Then, recovering himself finely, Tom set to work and disposed of the last batsman with just four balls, and the game was over!

Seven to five was the final score, and the Amesville Blues, bat-bags and luggage in hand, went back to the trolley station with something of a swagger, followed by a throng of young Lynton citizens who tried to appease their disappointment by jeers and hoots. But the Blues could afford to be magnanimous and forgiving, and so they trudged ahead and paid no attention to their tormentors and were soon in the trolley car, speeding back to Amesville. [172]

Thorny crowded in beside Tom and asked many questions. Where had Tom learned to pitch? Was he going to try for the high school team next year? Didn't he really have anything besides that out-shoot? And was it a fact that he had never pitched in a game before? Tom replied frankly and modestly and told Thorny how he had acquired what little skill he had. And Thorny was both amused and admiring. The idea of studying the art of pitching from a book of instructions struck him as terribly funny.

"Well, anyway," he declared finally, "you'll make a pitcher all right, Tom, if you just keep on with it. I don't know how good your stuff is, because I didn't stand up to you, but it seemed to fool those Lynton chaps pretty well, and you know they batted me pretty hard in the spring. But what I like about you is your action in the box. I'll bet you're a born twirler, Tom. You were as cool as a cucumber——"

"Oh, no, I wasn't!" laughed Tom. "I was pretty nearly scared to death at first!"

"But you didn't show it! No one would ever have known it! And that's the best part of it, don't you see? It's easy enough to look cool when you're feeling that way, but it's harder than thunder to do it when your nerves are all pulling every whichway. I know, because I've been through with it. The first game I ever pitched was in my second year at grammar school. We had a little twelve-year-old team and used to play out by the car barns. I knew how to curve a ball about once in five times and the first day I pitched I was scared blue. But no one ever knew it, I'll bet! And I pitched rings around the other team because I bluffed them into thinking I was a perfect wonder!" Thorny laughed reminiscently. "If you haven't got the goods, Tom, the next best thing is to make believe you have, I guess. Only, at that, you've got to make the bluff good! If you try for the nine [173]

next spring, you'll make it, sure as shooting. There's only Pete Farrar in sight for next year and he isn't much."

"I'd like to play mighty well," acknowledged Tom, "but you see I have to work after school and so I guess I couldn't."

"Work be blowed!" responded Thorny as emphatically as inelegantly. "You'll have to find someone to take your job, Tom. We can't afford to lose a good pitcher on account of a little work. Cummings and Wright will have to find someone else, I guess." [174]

But Tom shook his head. "I need the money, Brooks," he said earnestly. "I couldn't afford to give up my job. I'm sorry."

Thorny frowned thoughtfully. Then his face cleared. "Well, we'll find a way around that difficulty when the time comes. Meanwhile you keep on practising. Don't get stale, old man. And, above all, don't overwork that arm. The trouble is you're likely to strain it or something handling heavy boxes or doing some other fool stunt. You've got to take care of it, Tom."

"I'll try to, but I don't believe I can lift boxes with just one hand."

"You oughtn't to be doing it at all. A fellow that's got the making of a perfectly dandy pitcher hasn't any business risking his whole future the way you're doing."

Tom smiled. "I guess my whole future wouldn't amount to much if I didn't work," he said. "I'd like mighty well to pitch for the school if they wanted me to; I—I'm sort of crazy about playing ball; but I guess I wouldn't be much good if I didn't eat sometimes. And I wouldn't be doing much eating if I quit working." [175]

"Haven't you got any folks to look after you?" demanded Thorny.

"Only an uncle. And he wouldn't let me stay around here and play baseball without I was making my living besides. If I stopped working here, I'd have to go out home and work on the farm."

"He's a funny sort of an uncle," growled Thorny. "I should think he'd be proud to have you pitch for the high school team. Most uncles would, I guess. Anyhow, you keep on with it, Tom. And, say, if you like, I'll show you what I know about it. I can teach you a pretty good drop and a slow ball. And that's about all you'll need if you use your head and change your pace now and then. After all, it isn't curves that wins; it's using your 'bean!'"

"I'd like very much to have you show me," answered Tom gratefully. "Only I guess I wouldn't learn very quick, and it—it would be a heap of bother to you."

"No, it wouldn't. I'd like it. Only thing is"—and Thorny frowned thoughtfully—"I'll be going off to college pretty soon. Still, we might have a go at it Monday. And maybe we could get together a few more times before I leave. I'd like to see the team have a good pitcher to start out with next spring." [176]

It was finally arranged that Tom was to call at Thorny's house Monday after supper for his first lesson. "I'll get a kid to catch you," said Thorny. "Have you got a catcher's mitt?"

Tom hadn't, but, after a moment of hesitation, recklessly promised to bring one. (After all, it would only cost him about a dollar at wholesale prices.) But Walter, who had been listening, came to the rescue by undoing his own mitt from his belt and passing it over.

"You may take this, Tom," he said. "I won't need it until Wednesday and you can leave it with Thorny. How about the wrist, Thorny? Going to be able to pitch for us Wednesday?"

"I guess so." Thorny worked the wounded wrist experimentally and winced a little. "It'll be all right then, I think. If it isn't, Tom can take my place and I'll play in the field."

"I couldn't play Wednesday," said Tom. "I'll have to work. I'm only taking a week's vacation."

"Won't they let you off for the afternoon if you ask them?" demanded Walter. [177]

"I—I wouldn't like to ask," replied Tom. "Not so soon after vacation."

Walter was mutinous. "What's the good of being able to pitch the way you can if you don't do it?" he asked. "That makes me tired!"

"I'm real sorry," said Tom apologetically. Walter sniffed.

"I thought, anyway, you'd play in the field for us. Say, I tell you what I'll do, Tom. I'll go around and see Cummings myself. I'll tell him we need you that afternoon. He's a good sort and——"

"I—I'd rather you wouldn't, please," begged Tom. "I'd play for you in a minute if I could. But they've been mighty nice to me and it don't seem fair to ask for an afternoon off so soon after a whole week's vacation. If I could, I'd be playing baseball all the time. I'd rather do it than—than eat, I guess!"

"Well, if Thorny can't pitch Wednesday," returned Walter doggedly, "you'll just have to, work or no work. And that goes, doesn't it, Thorny?"

"Well, we certainly want to lick the Springs team," said the pitcher. "And, if I can't pitch, I guess it'll be up to Tom." [178]

"I would if I could——" began Tom. But Walter cut him short.

"You will, too, if I have to go down there to the store and drag you out," he said positively. "Here we are, fellows! Let's give 'em a cheer now just to show we're here!"

And so, as the car turned into Main Street, a vociferous greeting issued from the rear seats of the trolley, announcing to the world at large that the Blues were home again with another scalp!

Tom went back to Derry that evening by a late train and John Green and Star were at the station to meet him with the buggy. And all the way home to the farm Tom regaled the hired man's ears with a history of the great victory, John Green, whose notions of baseball were scanty and confused, listening with flattering attention, while Star, nestling between Tom's legs, wiggled with ecstasy. On Monday, Tom went back to Amesville and to the store and his labours. And for a fortnight life was busily monotonous. He didn't play with the Blues again, either in the field or the pitcher's box. Thorny's disability only lasted a day or two and he finished out the season for the team. The Monday lesson didn't come off, for the reason that a driving autumn rain set in Monday forenoon and lasted three days. After that the occasion never occurred when both Tom and Thorny were at liberty, and some ten days later Thorny went off to college in Illinois, and Tom didn't see him again until near Christmas time.

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And then, one fine crisp autumn day, Sidney came back and Tom went down to the station at noon to meet him.

CHAPTER XIV

[180]

COACH TALBOT MAKES A CALL

It was awfully nice to have Sidney home again. Tom didn't realise until now how much he had really missed him. And Mrs. Morris, too; and Mr. Morris to a lesser extent. They were all three sunburned and healthy-looking and very glad to be back once more. Mr. Morris left the carriage at his office and the others went out to Alameda Avenue together, Sidney rattling off a history of the summer with sparkling eyes, appealing to his mother every other minute for confirmation. In a lapse of Sidney's chatter, Mrs. Morris told Tom how disappointed they had been when he had written that he could not visit them. "Sidney felt so badly," she said, "that he immediately went out and tried to drown himself!"

Sidney grinned. "The canoe went over," he explained. "I was only about two or three hundred feet from shore and Mumsie was on the porch and she wouldn't come out for me!"

"But what did you do?" questioned Tom with wide eyes.

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"Oh, I sat on the end of the overturned canoe and worked in with my feet. I'd lost the paddle. The trouble was there was a breeze off shore and it took me nearly half an hour to get back. And Mumsie just sat there and watched me!"

"But weren't you frightened?" asked Tom, turning bewilderedly to Mrs. Morris.

"Oh, no; I knew he could swim if he had to. And I thought it would teach him a lesson and make him more careful." She laughed that little soft laugh of hers. "Sid was *so* angry when he got back that his teeth chattered!"

"I guess your teeth would have chattered if you'd had to sit on the bottom of that canoe for half an hour with the wind blowing on you?" Sidney grumbled. "I call it a mean trick, don't you, Tom?"

"I think——" Tom hesitated, casting a doubtful glance at Mrs. Morris.

"Well?" she demanded, her eyes dancing.

"I think," he went on boldly, "it must have been terribly hard for your mother to stay on the porch!"

"It was, Tom," she confessed. "I'm afraid I'd never have done for a Spartan mother!"

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They wanted Tom to stay and have luncheon with them, but he had to refuse and hurry back to the store, promising, however, to return for dinner. That was a very merry affair, that first dinner at home, and Mr. Morris, usually somewhat grave and abstracted, was so jovial and flippant that Tom quite lost his awe of him. Afterward the boys adjourned to Sidney's room and had a regular "talkfest," as Sidney called it. Of course Tom had to tell about the game with Lynton and Sidney heard it with dancing eyes and wished at intervals he had been there.

"Think of you pitching against those fellows!" he exclaimed. "Why, they must have had pretty near their regular line-up, didn't they? Say, I guess Thorny is right."

"About what?" asked Tom.

"About your giving up that job and playing on the team in the spring. Why, we've just got to have you, Tom! Farrar can't pitch for a cent and he's too stuck-up to take advice. We need you, Tom, and that's all there is to it!"

"But how can I play?" Tom demanded. "Cummings and Wright aren't going to pay me wages for being in the store only about two hours all day long!"

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"We'll have to think of a way out of it," Sidney responded untroubledly. "There's lots of time. Besides, something may happen. Maybe a wealthy relative will die before spring and leave you a lot of money."

Tom smiled. "I haven't any relatives, wealthy or poor," he said, "except Uncle Israel. And he doesn't intend to die, and I wouldn't want him to."

"Pshaw!" laughed Sidney, "it's always a relative that you don't know about or have forgotten that does that sort of thing. Anyway, that's the way it is in the stories!"

School began a few days later and Tom went back to lessons again. He was a sophomore this year, and Sidney was a junior. Tom had more and harder work to do than last year, but it went easier, probably because he had learned how to apply himself to study. With the beginning of the school year football came into its own again. Sidney was out for his old place at right-end on the high school eleven and, although now and then he allowed himself to be beguiled into pitching and catching with Tom, his visits to the open lot after dinner were usually made with a football tucked under his arm. He showed Tom how to punt and drop-kick and catch and throw, but Tom's heart was not in it and all the time he was chasing the elusive pigskin his hands were itching for a baseball. Sidney, however, declared that there was plenty of time for baseball when spring came again and was so full of football that he had time for little else. [184]

At the store Tom had stocked up thoroughly with all the implements and apparel of the game and the sporting goods department did a rushing business in footballs, head-guards, shoes, canvas suits, shirts, and sweaters. The grammar school outfitted its team anew and Tom secured the contract for the togs, while from neighbouring towns mail-orders came in every day. In October he sent in his orders for winter goods: sleds, toboggans, skis, snowshoes, skates, and hockey supplies. When, shortly after Thanksgiving, Amesville had its first snowstorm, Tom, with Mr. Cummings's sanction, took possession of one entire window and stayed up half of the night dressing it. [185]

With packing cases and boards from the basement he built up an elevation at one back corner and covered it and the floor of the window as well with sheets of cotton-batting. Over this he sprinkled powdered mica. Four evergreen shrubs in tubs were borrowed and placed at the back. ("Evergreens from Davis the Florist, 163 Main Street," was the inscription which adorned them.) Then Tom arranged his exhibit. A toboggan with a stunning red cushion was tilted down the incline, skis and sleds were displayed enticingly, at the back, hockey sticks were crossed and pucks laid at the intersections, and a row of skates made a border along the front. Snow-shoes with brave scarlet tassels were there, too, while more colour was supplied to the frosty scene by gaudy toboggan caps, madly-hued Mackinaw jackets, and high-school and grammar-school pennants. Tom had had the idea of that window in mind a long time and so there was no hesitation when the opportunity came. Even so, however, it was after one o'clock when he went outside to stand in the snowstorm and take a final, admiring view of the result. It was, he decided, well worth the trouble and the loss of slumber, and he put the lights out, locked up, and trudged home, through four inches of feathery snow, well content. That window display caused much interest and comment. Even the papers called attention to it, and as long as the snow lasted rows of small red noses were pressed daily against the panes while the eager eyes of small boys gazed covetously on the contents and youthful hearts doubtless longed for the advent of Christmas. [186]

Meanwhile the High School Football Team was doing brave deeds and winning many laurels. Tom got an afternoon off when the final and most important game of the year was played and had his first real experience of football from the spectator's viewpoint. He got awfully excited when, at the end of the second period, Petersburg was four points ahead, and far more excited when, just as the game was drawing to its close and defeat for Amesville seemed certain, there came a forward pass, a final desperate attempt on the part of the Brown-and-Blue, and Sidney, taking the ball far over on the side of the field, raced and dodged and tore his way through the Petersburg army and landed the pigskin seven yards from the goal-line! Nothing could stop Amesville then! Three downs took her across, Captain Neely kicked the goal, and victory perched on the waving brown-and-blue banners of Amesville! [187]

Once through with football, Sidney went as enthusiastically into hockey, mourning the period of inactivity that must elapse before Jack Frost took possession of the world and froze the ponds and streams. Sidney fulfilled his promise to show Tom how to use a hockey stick that winter, for the High School Athletic Association built by popular subscription a rink on a piece of vacant ground across the street from the school. Tom's instruction usually took place at lunch hour, when the surface was so congested that real skating or hockey was out of the question. Tom learned quickly and Sidney declared flatteringly that he could make the team if he had the time for it.

Christmas came and went. It was a very busy season for Tom and the sporting goods department did a wonderful business. A year ago he would have laughed at the idea of there being as many sweaters in the world as Cummings and Wright sold that year in the holidays! Tom had had a factory turn out a brown coat-sweater with a broad blue band around the middle, and those went like hot cakes. [188]

The first of the new year Tom moved from Mrs. Cleary's to a larger and more comfortable room on Turner Street. In many ways he was sorry to leave, as sorry, perhaps, as the Clearys were to have him. But his new abode was much nearer the store and the school, the house was a better one, and his new room well furnished. Besides, he could get his meals under the same roof, which was an advantage. To be sure, it was going to cost him well over a dollar more to live each week, but now he was receiving his full wages of five dollars, for the pump had at last been fully paid for and he held Cummings and Wright's bill-of-sale for it. He meant in the spring to take formal possession of it and have it brought to town and stored in the basement of the store, where, perhaps, it might find a purchaser. At Christmas his employers had presented him with a five-

dollar gold-piece and Uncle Israel had given him the same amount, although it was in greasy one- and two-dollar bills instead of shining metal. So, on the whole, he felt quite affluent as he took possession of his new room. [189]

It was on the front of the house and looked out into a quiet, shabby-genteel little street in which boarding-houses and small shops were indiscriminately mixed. But there were maple trees along the sidewalk and a good-sized yard at one side of the house, and, in summer, as he knew, for he had passed the house quite often on his way to school, beds of geraniums and coleus. The landlady was a grim-looking but kind-hearted elderly woman who supported a rather worthless husband. Mr. Tully was always, it seemed to Tom, looking for work and never finding it. He was a likable sort of little man, for all his failings, and he and Tom got to be good friends in the course of time. There were many roomers at Mrs. Tully's and at dinner the long table held always a dozen or more boarders. The food was sufficient, but lacked what Tom called the "filling" qualities of Mrs. Burns's viands. He often sighed for one of the latter woman's beef stews with dumplings! At Mrs. Tully's, if they had beef stew it was called something else and served in dishes so tiny that Tom mentally referred to them as "sample trays." [190]

The other members of the household were mostly clerks, many of them employed at Miller and Tappen's. There was one, however, Mr. George, who had a more fascinating occupation. He was a private detective in the employ of the railroad company, although Tom did not discover this fact, which was not generally known, until he had been at Mrs. Tully's for a month. Then it was Mr. Tully who told him. Mr. Tully liked to come to Tom's "third-floor-front" in the evenings when Tom was at home and, occupying the easy-chair, which he grumblingly declared was the only comfortable chair in the house, put his feet on the window-ledge and fill the room with the strong, acrid smoke of his big brown meerschaum pipe. Somehow Tom didn't mind his presence in the least and could study quite as well when Mr. Tully was sitting there in silent meditation as when he was alone. Mr. Tully was very fond of talking, especially of Mr. Tully and the things he had done in his time, but he never interfered with Tom's studies.

That winter was a mild one in that part of Ohio, although there was one fierce blizzard in late February which marooned Mr. Cummings, Joe Gillig, Miss Miller, and Tom in the store all one night! It was not until five in the morning that the storm abated sufficiently to allow Miss Miller to get home and the men to wade to the restaurant across the street and eat what was their first real meal in fifteen hours! The snow stayed on the ground nearly a week and thereby prolonged the winter sports considerably. It was one evening at that time that Tom had his first breathtaking ride down Sumner's Hill on Sidney's toboggan. He didn't forget it for a long while, for it was as nearly like flying as anything he ever expected to experience. They made three trips up the hill that evening and as many down, while a big white moon sailed overhead and seemed to look down companionably on them. Tom would have had a perfectly dandy time all the evening had not Sidney insisted on filling the toboggan to its capacity with girls on the second trip. Tom tried to escape, but Sidney insisted that he was needed at the back, and so Tom, with what little grace he could find, squatted behind May Warner, who was his particular detestation, and almost dropped off when half-way down the long, steep hill because he refused to hold on to May and there wasn't much else he could reach! [191]

March came in like a lion, but soon tamed down, and a week of mild, sunny days set the boys thinking of baseball. Even before this the candidates for the high school team had been at work in a desultory sort of way. There was no real baseball cage at their command, but a long room in the basement of the school had been converted to their use by placing wire screens over the high windows, and here a certain amount of pitching and batting practice was gone through with. Owing, however, to the poor light down there, this indoor work could hardly be said to be very beneficial. [192]

The baseball leader this year was Frank Warner, brother of May, a senior-class fellow and not particularly popular. There was nothing much wrong with him, save that he was what the fellows called "chesty." His father was president of the Traders' National Bank, the largest institution of the sort in that part of the state, and Frank couldn't forget the fact, it seemed. His "chestiness" made him scornful of advice and impatient of authority. But he *could* play ball; there was no doubt about that; and it was to that fact that he owed his election to the captaincy. He played second base and was the best batsman the team had possessed in many years. As a leader he was as yet an unknown quantity, and it was an open secret that the athletic association had hesitated some time before endorsing his election, which hesitancy was due to the well-known fact that he took unkindly to advice and criticism, and the fear that he might not get along well with the coach. [193]

The coach was a former high school boy named Talbot. He was no longer a boy, being a sturdy young man of twenty-six and a promising lawyer in Amesville. But Mr. Bennet A. Talbot's practice was as yet not large enough to prohibit him from giving much time every spring to the coaching of the baseball team, an unremunerative task which he performed for sheer love of the game and loyalty to the school. When a youngster he had been known as "Bat," a nickname derived from his initials, and the appellation still held. A better man to take charge of a group of boys couldn't have been found, for he was still very much of a boy himself in feelings, able to get a boy's viewpoint, sympathetic, and enthusiastic. But Mr. Talbot insisted on obedience, and the school in general awaited with frank interest the first clash of wills between coach and captain. [194]

Both Thorny and Walter White were gone from the team this spring, but Walter was still in Amesville and took much interest in the team. It was Walter who continually insisted that Tom should come out for the nine and who finally brought the matter to the coach's attention, with the result that Mr. Talbot called on Tom in the store one afternoon in late March.

"Walter White," he said, "tells me that you can pitch, Pollock. Now, we need pitchers the worst way this spring. We're pretty nearly destitute in that line. What's the matter with your trying for the job, Pollock?"

Tom explained that his work prevented. Mr. Talbot frowned, just as Thorny had done, and was inclined to belittle the excuse. When, however, Tom mildly inquired how he was to earn his board and lodging if he gave up his position in the hardware store, the coach was at a loss.

"If we were a professional team," he replied with a smile, "we could pay you a salary, but I'm afraid as it is we can't. But I'm sorry. White says you've got the making of a good pitcher, and it seems too bad that we can't get your help. I suppose there is no way that you could arrange with your employers to get off in the afternoons?"

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"I don't think so, sir. You see, I'm only here, anyway, a few hours a day—except on Saturdays. Besides, Mr. Talbot, I can't pitch much. I guess Walter was sort of—sort of exaggerating."

The coach went away dissatisfied, and Tom sighed regretfully for what might have been. An enticing vision of Tom Pollock, attired in the brown-and-blue of Amesville High School, standing commandingly in the pitcher's box and dealing puzzling curves to a bewildered opponent, came to him, and he sighed again as he folded up a pair of running trunks and laid them away in their flat pasteboard box.

Sidney evolved all sorts of schemes for Tom's emancipation from labour, including a popular subscription to reimburse him for his wages and a direct appeal by the athletic association, backed up by the school in general, to Cummings and Wright!

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"But I can't pitch much, anyway!" Tom would declare, at last a bit impatient. "You seem to think I'm a wonder, but, shucks, I wouldn't last two innings against Petersburg! All I've got is an out-shoot and a straight ball!"

"Yes, a straight ball that goes about ninety miles an hour and crosses the plate so fast you can't see it until ten minutes after! And you're learning the drop, too! Of course, I don't claim that you're as good as Thorny Brooks yet, but I do say that if you came out and let Bat Talbot get hold of you you'd be a peach by the middle of the season. And I think it's a shame you can't!"

And Tom thought so, too, although he didn't say it!

CHAPTER XV

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THE PUMP CHANGES HANDS

In April, after the roads dried off, Tom engaged one of Malloy's trucks to bring the pump in from the farm. It cost him ten dollars and he sometimes doubted the wisdom of it. Uncle Israel remitted the storage charge when confronted with the money.

"Guess," he said, "as Cummings knocked off four dollars and a half to you, Tom, we won't say anything about storage. I guess you're a fool, though, to pay those men ten dollars to lug that thing to town, because you'll never sell it for more'n that."

Tom rather doubted it himself, but he went through with it and in due time the pump, a rather cumbersome and very heavy affair, was deposited in the basement of the hardware store. It was Mr. Cummings who advised the expenditure of further money in the shape of an advertisement in a morning paper and who helped write it.

"I guess," he said, "we won't put any price on it. We'll just say, 'Cheap for cash.' If anyone comes to look at it, you leave him to me."

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Tom was very glad to, for he greatly doubted his ability to conduct advantageous bargaining. The advertisement ran three mornings a week for over a month and cost Tom five dollars and twenty cents and brought no returns. Nor did a card displayed at the back of the store, setting forth in Tom's best lettering the fact that a rare bargain awaited some lucky purchaser, do any better. Tom had almost forgotten the existence of the pump when, one morning in April, he stopped on Main Street to watch the excavating for a new office building. The contractors had struck water at a depth of some eighteen feet below the street level and the workmen were wading and splashing about in a good twelve inches of it. They had one pump at work, but it was quite evident to the spectators that fringed the railing that the pump was making little if any headway. A middle-aged man with a perplexed expression emerged from the temporary office and, accompanied by a subordinate, watched the work for a moment. As the two men were within a few feet of Tom, he could not help overhearing what was said.

"That thing isn't doing enough work to earn its oil," said the contractor disgustedly, nodding to the pump and the long length of big hose that ran down to the water. "Brown and Cole say they can't ship until next week. Funny thing we can't get a pump nearer than Chicago!"

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"Next week!" responded the foreman bitterly. "What'll I be doing until next week with all this gang? I don't dare lay them off. Stevens is after men for that new job of his."

"Bailing wouldn't help much, I suppose."

"Not a bit, save to keep them at work. The water's running in faster'n we can pump it out."

Sure, it's a regular spring we've struck, I'm thinking."

"No, it's not a spring, Jim; it's a subterranean stream that flows between that gravel and the clay underneath. With another pump I guess we could hold it all right. Meanwhile, though, we're losing a couple of hundred dollars a day and getting behind on the contract."

"Subterranean it may be," replied Jim disgustedly. "I don't know if it is or not, but it's holdin' us back from the work. I know that. What's the matter with gettin' a lot of hand-pumps, sir? The water company'll be havin' one or two, maybe, and the plumbers——"

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"Good idea, Jim! At least it'll help and it'll keep those dagos busy. If we've got to keep them, we might as well make them work. I'll see what I can do."

He turned away and hurried through the crowd. But Tom was after him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, touching the contractor's arm. "But I heard you say something about a pump."

"Eh? Yes, what of it? Know where I can get one—buy, borrow, or steal?"

"I—that is, Cummings and Wright have one for sale. It's only been used twice and it's in perfect condition, sir."

"Thanks. I'll have a look at it. Wish I'd known about it two days ago. What make is it?"

Tom told him and he nodded. But Tom couldn't answer the other questions the contractor put as they hurried up the street. In the store Tom left the contractor and hurried to the office after Mr. Cummings, who, fortunately, was in. A few words explained the situation and in a minute Mr. Cummings and the contractor were on their way downstairs. In an almost incredibly short space of time they emerged again, the contractor hurried away and Mr. Cummings, smiling broadly, sought Tom.

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"You're in luck, Tom," he announced. "He jumped at it. They're going to haul it away in ten minutes."

"He bought it?" asked Tom eagerly.

"No, I made him a present of it," laughed Mr. Cummings. "For sixty dollars."

"Sixty dollars! Why—why, it only cost that much when it was new!" ejaculated Tom.

"Sixty-four and a half, son. He'd have paid a hundred, I guess, if I'd asked it. He's losing that much every day for the want of it. Oh, he was tickled enough to get it for sixty! There's no kick coming from him. And I guess you're not kicking either, are you?"

"No, sir! I—I'm awfully much obliged. If you don't mind, Mr. Cummings, I'd like you to take out that four and a half."

"Commission, eh? Nonsense, Tom; we don't want that four-fifty. We've more than got our money back on it, son. You want to remember that that pump didn't cost us sixty-four and a half, not by fifteen dollars and more. We're satisfied. He's going to mail his check for the money. What shall I do with it—endorse it over to you or give you the money?"

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"I guess—I guess you might just endorse it, sir. I think I'll start a bank account with that!"

"A good idea, son, a mighty good idea. Take it over to the Trust Company and they'll give you four per cent. on it. Nothing like having a savings account, Tom."

Tom told Sidney of his good fortune at lunch hour and Sidney smote him triumphantly on the back, inducing a severe cough. "Now," cried Sidney, "you can afford to give up your job and pitch for us!"

"Do what?" gasped Tom.

"Why, leave the store and come out for the team! What's to prevent you now?"

"Say, Sid, how long do you suppose sixty dollars would last if I had to pay for my room and meals out of it?"

Sidney's face fell. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't last very long," he acknowledged, sobered. "Maybe—maybe three months. Then you could go back to work again." He brightened. "What's the matter with doing that?" he demanded.

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"I don't believe they'd take me back," answered Tom with a smile for the impracticable suggestion.

"Oh, you could get a job somewhere else," answered his chum easily.

"Maybe I could and maybe I couldn't. Anyway, I wouldn't want to leave Cummings and Wright's, even to play baseball! Who'd look after my sporting goods for me?"

"Oh, hang your old sporting goods!" said Sidney disgustedly. "If you had any—any patriotism, any right feeling, you'd come out and help the team, Tom! Why, say, you ought to see Pete Farrar in the box. He—he's a—a fake, that's all he is, a regular fake!"

"Isn't there anyone else?" asked Tom sympathetically.

"Three or four," said Sidney gloomily. "Bat's trying his best to develop them, but they're all pretty green. There's Toby Williams. You know him, don't you? He's in your class. He's the best of the lot. He pitched for the grammar school a couple of years ago, but he's only fifteen and hasn't much on the ball. Oh, we may pull through with what we have, but we certainly need a real

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pitcher. The funny part of it is that Pete Farrar thinks he's a regular wonder, Tom. He and Frank Warner are great cronies, you know, and maybe if we had a decent pitcher Frank wouldn't let him into the box in a big game. He seems to think Pete's all right. Has an idea, I guess, that as long as he's playing second it doesn't matter who's in the box!"

"Doesn't seem as if Frank Warner could cover the whole field," objected Tom.

"Oh, he thinks—I don't know what he thinks! Bet you there'll be a mix-up between him and Bat Talbot pretty soon. Bat won't stand much funny-business."

"When do you play your first game?"

"Two weeks from to-morrow; Y.M.C.A. Team. They'll beat us, of course, but Bat says it'll give us good practice."

"That's a Saturday, isn't it? I guess I'll try and get out to see it. How are you hitting, Sid?"

"Rotten! So we all are. Bat had us at the net over an hour yesterday and he was hopping mad at the way we missed them." Sidney chuckled. "He told Buster he swung at the ball with—what was it he said? Oh, 'with all the ineffable grace of a derrick!' Buster was so mad he almost swallowed his tongue trying to keep it still!"

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"That *must* have been hard for Buster," replied Tom, with a laugh. "Guess I'll certainly have to get out some day and see your wonderful team at work!"

Sidney gazed at him reproachfully. "If you were half-way decent," he said, "you'd come out and help instead of poking fun at us!"

At Mrs. Tully's boarding-house dinner was served at the fashionable hour of six-thirty, and quite often Tom had nearly a half-hour to wait after getting home from the store. Sometimes he made use of the interim to study the morrow's lessons, sometimes he read the morning paper, turning first of all to the baseball and sporting news, and sometimes, if the weather was fair, he sat on the front steps and conversed with whoever turned up there. With the advent of warmer weather it was almost always pleasanter on the front steps than indoors. The grass in the little plot in front began to take on a tinge of new green and the shrubbery that hid the party fence along the side-yard showed swollen buds. One spring-like evening, a day or two after the last recorded talk with Sidney, Tom came downstairs after washing for dinner and seated himself on the top step at Mrs. Tully's. None of the other boarders were there and after a moment Tom, hands in pockets, possessed of a restlessness that made sitting still uncomfortable, wandered past the newly raked flower bed and into the side-yard. There was a long stretch of turf there, flanked on one side by the hedge and fence and on the other by a gravel walk which led along the side of the house, under the parlour and dining-room windows, to a gate in a brown board fence. This fence hid the back-yard where the clothes were dried and where the ashes were kept until, on Monday mornings, Mr. Tully, attired in blue overalls, rolled them out in four big galvanised iron barrels to the sidewalk, whistling "The Star-Spangled Banner." Just what connection there might be between ashes and the star-spangled banner, Tom couldn't make out; but Mr. Tully always whistled that particular tune and nothing else on such occasions.

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Viewing the stretch of turf which in olden days would have made a fine bowling green, and the brown board fence, Tom had an idea. Ceasing his own whistling and bringing his hands smartly from his pockets, he turned and hurried up two flights of stairs to his room. When he returned he had a baseball in his hand. Measuring off the proper distance, Tom faced the division fence and began to throw the ball at it. It was rather a noisy operation and every moment he expected to hear remonstrance from Mrs. Tully. But he had thrown and recovered the ball a dozen times and his arm was getting nicely limbered up before anything happened. Then footsteps crunched on the path and Tom looked up to see Mr. George observing him with smiling interest.

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The railroad detective was rather disappointing in appearance, judged by one's usual notion of what a detective should look like. He was tall and square-shouldered, had a large face with high cheek-bones and a prominent nose, and wore a black moustache that was clipped short. There were rather heavy brows over a pair of mild brown eyes and his cheeks were rather ruddy. Altogether, he looked prosperous and healthy and, above all, peaceable. He invariably wore dark Oxford clothes, but had a passion, it seemed, for loudly hued neckties. A rather heavy gold fob dangled into sight occasionally from a waistcoat pocket and a very big diamond ring adorned a finger of his left hand. At table Mr. George was not talkative. Neither was he taciturn. He never, however, made mention of his business. He and Tom always spoke when they met, but beyond that their acquaintance had not progressed. Now, though, he began conversation at once.

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"What are you pitching?" he asked, crossing the grass to a position behind the boy.

"Just an out-curve, or trying to," replied Tom, a trifle embarrassed.

"Let's see it," said the other.

Tom pitched and made rather a mess of it. "I'm not very good at it," he murmured deprecatingly.

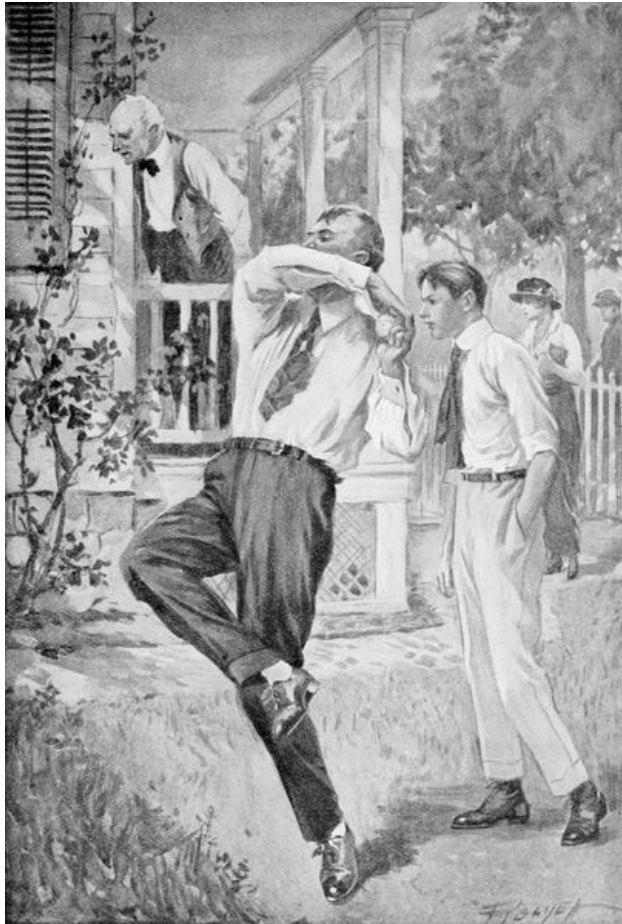
"What you want is something to pitch across," said the detective. "Wait a minute." He set off to the back-yard and was soon back with the galvanised iron lid of an ash barrel. He set it on the grass some six feet from the fence. "That's rather a big plate, isn't it?" he asked with a smile. "Now let her go."

Tom, who had picked up his ball again, obeyed, and Mr. George nodded. "That's not bad for a 'roundhouse curve,' son. What you want to do, though, is to make 'em break sharper."

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Tom viewed him in surprise and interest. "Can you show me how?" he asked eagerly.

"I guess I might," was the reply. Mr. George leisurely divested himself of his coat, laid it, carefully folded, on the grass and took the ball. "It's some time since I tried this," he explained, fingering the ball knowingly. ["Now you watch, son. Better get behind me so's you can see."](#)



["Now you watch, son. Better get behind me so's you can see"](#)

Mr. George drew his arm back, brought his left foot off the ground and swung it around his right leg, and pitched. Down came arm and leg together and off went the ball. Tom watched it. He had just begun to tell himself that, after all, Mr. George had pitched only the straightest sort of a straight ball, when the flying sphere "broke" abruptly to the left and downward and slammed against the fence so forcibly that it rolled half-way back again.

"Gee!" said Tom admiringly. "That was some curve!"

"No curve about that, son. That's an out-shoot. You see, your curve begins to break to the left almost as soon as it leaves your hand, but a shoot doesn't break until it's travelled part of the distance to the plate. Now you take an old-style in-curve, and that's a good deal harder to pitch than an out-shoot, and put it over the inside of the plate. It isn't hard for the batter because an in-curve never has as much on it as an out. But you make that in-curve an in-shoot, and it's a puzzler. There was a fellow pitched with us two seasons down in Montgomery and he had an in-shoot that didn't begin to break until it was right up to the plate. It was a dandy, I tell you. I tried to get him to show me that ball and he was willing enough, but he just couldn't seem to explain it. I never could get it right."

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"Did you—did you use to play baseball?" asked Tom with a touch of awe in his voice.

The detective nodded. "Eight years at it—Southern, Central, and Texas leagues. That was 'most ten years ago now. There wasn't anything in it and I quit before they threw me into the real bush. It isn't bad as long as you're young, but baseball isn't any business for a man after thirty. And I'm getting on toward forty-five now. Let's see your ball again. Here's a drop that used to fool 'em some."

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And it certainly was a drop! Mr. George wasn't satisfied with it, explaining that his arm was all out of practice, but it almost made Tom's eyes pop out! And the remarkable thing about the detective's pitching was that he did it with seemingly no effort and the ball simply flew through the air! Tom wondered what would happen to the fence if he really tried to pitch a swift one!

"I wish I could pitch like that," he said enviously. "Or half as good."

"Maybe you will when you've been at it longer," responded Mr. George. "Take it from me, son, there isn't anything you can't teach your muscles to do if you go at it right. Haven't got a mitt, have you?"

"No, sir."

"I was going to say, if you had, I'd catch a few for you. I'll get one to-morrow and you and I'll have some fun out here. I haven't held a baseball for two years and it feels good." He swung his

arm around and made a grimace. "Stiff as a crutch," he said. "Let's see yours, son."

Tom stepped over and the detective ran his fingers up and down the boy's arm and around his shoulder. Then he nodded approvingly. "You got a start, all right," he said. "You got good stuff up there at the shoulder, and that's where you need it. Done much of it?" [212]

"Pitching? No, sir, not much. I just started last spring. A fellow and I—he plays with the high school team—we used to pitch and catch sometimes of an evening. Then this summer I pitched in a couple of games for the Blues. They said I didn't do so badly."

"Want to learn more about it?"

"Yes, sir, very much. I tried to teach myself out of a book, but it's pretty hard."

Mr. George sniffed. "There isn't any book that'll teach you, son. But I can. And I will if you want me to. There's the dinner gong. To-morrow I'll buy us a catcher's mitt and we'll have some fun, eh?"

"Yes, sir, thank you. I wish, though, you'd let me buy the mitt. You see, Mr. George, I can get it at wholesale price."

"That so?" The detective pulled a roll of money from a pocket and peeled off a five-dollar bill. "Then you get me one, a good one, son."

"It won't be more than a dollar and seventy-five cents, I guess," Tom objected. [213]

"All right, but have it good. And if there's anything left you bring along a mask. Might as well do this thing right, eh? And we better have a new ball, too. This one's getting played out. Here, maybe you'll need some more money." And Mr. George put his hand to his pocket again.

"I've got enough, sir, I think," said Tom. "Anyway, it's only fair for me to pay for something. You see, it's me—I who am going to get the good of it."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the detective, slapping Tom on the shoulder as they passed around to the doorway. "I expect to get a bunch of fun out of it myself. And I guess it'll do me good to limber some of the splints out of my arm. Anyway, if you don't have enough, you let me know to-morrow. Practice is at six sharp, son!"

CHAPTER XVI

 [214]

THE DETECTIVE DONS A MASK

Almost every day after that Tom and Mr. George spent the half-hour preceding dinner in the side-yard. Frequently the half-hour lengthened into three-quarters and the two had to brave Mrs. Tully's coldly disapproving glances when they sought the table. Tom, though, was too happy to mind, while Mr. George seemed always quite unconscious of having transgressed a rule of the house. The more Tom saw of the detective the better he liked him. When they were together Mr. George—Tom discovered in time that his full name was Benjamin Culloden George—forgot that he was nearly forty-five, and made Tom forget it, too. He was jolly and full of jokes, infinitely patient while instructing Tom in the mysteries of the in-shoot or the drop ball, and a veritable mine of anecdotes of the playing field. And, best of all, he was able to impart what he knew about pitching a baseball, as able to teach as Tom was eager to learn. And Tom learned, too, putting his whole heart and soul into mastering the intricacies of pitching. Once Mr. George said to him: [215]

"One thing I like about you, Tom, is you don't say you understand when you don't. You make me tell it all over again and then you go and do it. Lots of folks will say they know what you mean and then show that they haven't got any idea!"

"I guess I'm kind of stupid about that wrist work," said Tom apologetically. "I—I don't get the hang of it very well."

"Don't you worry, it'll come to you. It just takes practice, lots of practice. After awhile you'll be snapping the ball away without knowing you're doing it. Now you try again. Never mind about putting it over the plate; just throw at the fence. Snap her under now! That was better. Oh, never mind where the ball went. We don't care about that—yet. See what I mean about the snap, don't you?"

"I see what you mean, all right, but I can't get it—yet."

"That's the idea! You can't get it—*yet*. That means that you know you will get it finally, eh? Sure! Now, always remember that a ball curves the way you pinch it. It's that pinch that gives the drag to it as it leaves your hand. The more drag the more spin, and the more spin the more curve. Only you don't ever want to pitch an in-curve, Tom. You see, you've got to start it off with a round-arm delivery and that puts the batter on every time. He knows what's coming, do you see? And he lams it! But if you give him an in-shoot he can't tell what it's going to be because an in-shoot starts off like any other ball. Curve 'em wide to the out, if you want to, but don't do any 'barrel-hoops' on the in. One more now." [216]

Mr. George was very strict about one thing, and that was not allowing Tom to overwork his arm. "Stop just as soon as it begins to heat up," he would say. Often Tom begged to be allowed to continue when that condition of affairs was reached, but the detective was firm on that point.

"Nothing doing, Tom. That'll be all for this time. You can't afford to monkey with a good arm like that."

By the first week in May, Tom knew how to pitch an out-shoot and in-shoot and a drop. I say he knew how, but I don't affirm that he always succeeded, for he didn't. This discouraged him at times, but Mr. George only laughed. "Why, Tom, if you could do what you wanted to with that ball every time, you'd be a—a sort of infant prodigy that you read about! How old are you, anyway?" [217]

"Sixteen and a half."

"Well, that half may help some," laughed the detective. "But you've got several years ahead of you yet before you'll reach top-form, son. Why, I couldn't do as well as you're doing when I was seventeen!"

At which Tom took comfort. Tom had read or heard of many more deliveries, such as the "fade-away," the "knuckle-ball," the "floater," and the "spit-ball," and was eager to have Mr. George show him about them. But his teacher put it off. "I can't pitch a 'spit-ball' myself, Tom," he said. "That came along after I quit the game. I know how it's done and some day we'll have a try at it. Same way with the 'knuckle-ball' and a lot of the other 'freaks.' What you want to do now is to learn control. You've got enough to start on; three good breaks and a straight ball is enough for any pitcher. After that it's just a matter of putting the ball where you want it, fooling the batter, teasing him with the wide ones, sneaking in the good ones under his nose, changing your pace, and having him hit too soon. Oh, there's a lot in the pitching game besides just curving the pellet, son! Why, I knew a fellow once, Purdy of the old Bristol team it was, who didn't have a thing on the ball except an out-shoot, 'two fingers only' we used to say. Of course he knew others, but they wouldn't work for him. Well, that old side-wheeler used to go into the box and have them eating out of his hand! Yes, sir, he just used his head, Gus did, and the way he'd serve 'em what they didn't want and make 'em bite at 'em was a caution! Why, fellows used to say that they'd rather go up against almost any of the big-uns than Gus Purdy when Gus was really pitching! You want to remember that there's all kinds of hitters in the world: hitters that want them high and hitters that like 'em low and hitters that will reach for 'em and hitters that won't. And here's another thing, Tom. Bear in mind that the plate is only a pretty narrow contrivance after all, but that the distance from a man's knee to his shoulder is something like three feet. Get that?" [218]

"You mean it's better to pitch for up and down position than for—for——"

"Right-o! You get me! You've got more room up and down than you have across. Learn to put them just about where you want to from knee to shoulder. That worries a batter more than having 'em come to him near or wide. But you've got to study your man, son. It always seemed to me that the best of the pitchers in my time were sort of mind readers. Some of 'em just seemed to know what the batter was thinking and what he was looking for. Yes, sir, there's a lot more to it than just pitching the ball!" [219]

Frequently, Tom went down to Mr. George's room on the second floor and listened breathlessly while the former minor leaguer told of exciting battles on the diamond or of queer experiences he had met with. There was always much practical advice mixed up with the stories, and this Tom imbibed thirstily. How or when his pitching ability was to prove of use to him he did not know, for there was certainly no present prospect; but his enthusiasm never waned. Day after day, save such times as the detective was away or Tom was detained late at the store, the two spent the half-hour before dinner in the side-yard. There, masked and mitted, Mr. George stood behind the plate—a slab of wood of the correct dimensions had long ago taken the place of the barrel lid—and caught the balls that Tom hurled to him. Sometimes, and this was when Sidney had gone to some party or entertainment to which all his persuasion failed to entice Tom along, there was an extra session after dinner. On such occasions there was invariably an interested audience of at least one, the one being Mr. Tully. [220]

Mr. George was drilling Tom in control now and it was a good deal like hard work. They had made up a set of signals and Tom, ball in hand, would watch Mr. George's fingers laid across the back of his big mitten and then do his best to put the ball over where it was wanted. High balls that cut the inner corner of the plate, high balls that passed over the middle of it, high balls that cut the outer corner, followed each other. Sometimes they were slow and sometimes fast. Mr. George was always calling for a change of pace. After the high balls came "waisters" and then low ones, and finally, as Tom's control progressed, Mr. George would "mix them up." [221]

"Here's a 'chopper,'" he would announce, referring to the mythical batsman. "What you going to give him, Tom?"

And Tom, winding up, would put the ball over the plate knee-high.

"That's the ticket! Now here's a 'swinger,' Tom." Whereupon Tom would serve a waist ball that passed across the inside of the plate.

"Strike! Sneak one over on him now."

A fast ball, between shoulder and waist, would follow and Mr. George would triumphantly announce another strike. "And now let's get rid of him, Tom!"

And Tom, his imagination almost visualising the non-existent 'swinger,' would, with a sudden change of pace, pitch a slow one straight over the centre of the plate, and:

"Striker's out!" Mr. George would declare.

Once they enlisted the services of Mr. Fales, a head clerk in Miller and Tappen's shipping department, to stand at the plate with a bat and strike at the balls as they went by. He had

explicit directions not to hit it, and probably didn't intend to, but he did finally and the ball passed through an open window in the parlour and demolished the glass in the framed picture of Washington Crossing the Delaware. After that they got along with less realism. [222]

Tom pitched with very little "wind-up," a fact which Mr. George greatly relished. One swing of his right arm, a short poise on the right foot, and then a long step forward and a good carry-through with arm and body. That was Tom's style, and Mr. George declared he couldn't better it. "I'm not saying that a hard 'wind-up' may not give more speed, but there's a lot of lost effort in it. Besides that, it gives a runner a fine chance to steal on you. Why, I've seen three men in one game steal home on a pitcher with a long 'wind-up.' Nowadays, with a fast runner on bases, the pitcher cuts out the 'wind-up' and pitches from the shoulder, not taking any chances, but what's the good of learning to pitch one way if you've got to pitch another way a dozen times in a game? Not that I'd advise a man who'd learned to pitch with a long 'wind-up' to change his style, though. I wouldn't. But I say to a fellow who's just learning: Go through as few motions as you can. You notice I always twist myself into a bunch. It never did me any good, except maybe it let me pitch a faster ball. Control's the thing, Tom, and it's usually the pitcher who keeps his feet on the ground most who has it best. Anyway, that's how it seems to me." [223]

Meanwhile, the high school team had struggled through the first three games of its schedule, losing two and winning one. So far neither Farrar nor Williams had shown enough stamina to pitch the full nine innings, and Sidney reported that Mr. Talbot was getting rather discouraged. Tom had not yet found an opportunity to see a game played, for business at the store was pretty brisk and he hesitated to ask for an afternoon off. Such an afternoon came, though, and in an unlooked-for way.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTERNOON PRACTICE

 [224]

It was a Thursday, languidly warm, and trade had been dull. Mr. Cummings wandered down to where Tom, having just got back from school, was placing selling marks on a new arrival of running shirts and trunks.

"How's the high school nine getting along, Tom?" he asked. "I saw they got beaten by the Y.M.C.A. team the other day."

"Yes, sir, rather badly. I haven't seen them play yet, but I hear that they're sort of up against it for pitchers this year."

"Haven't seen them, you say? That's so, you don't have much chance, do you? What do you think of that, Horace?" Mr. Cummings turned to the junior partner, who was busy across the store. "Here's Tom selling baseballs and bats and things and hasn't seen a game of ball yet. Hard luck, eh?"

Mr. Wright grunted and Mr. Cummings winked jovially at Tom. Then, to their surprise, Mr. Wright added, "I s'pose it is." [225]

Mr. Cummings laughed. "It surely is," he declared. "Tom, suppose you and I go and see a game this afternoon. I guess we won't be needed here."

"They don't play to-day, sir."

"Don't they!" Mr. Cummings was palpably disappointed. "Thought I saw a lot of the boys going out toward the field awhile ago in playing togs."

"They have practice every afternoon, sir."

"Oh, that's it! Well, what's the matter with going out there and seeing them practice?"

"I'd like to very much," answered Tom, "if I'm not needed in here." And he looked doubtfully across at Mr. Wright. The junior partner sniffed. "Guess we can do without you to-day," he said almost graciously. "Don't see what *you* want to go tagging off to a ball game for, Joseph." Mr. Cummings laughed again.

"Just to keep Tom out of mischief," he said. "Get your hat, Tom. Joe, if Mr. Wyman comes in about those locks, you tell him we got word to-day from the folks in Philadelphia and they're on the way. Ought to be here by Saturday, sure. Come on, Tom." [226]

They caught a car outside and Mr. Cummings pushed Tom into a rear seat. He chuckled as he selected a cigar from his case and lighted it. "Guess we did that pretty well," he said. "If I had a bag of peanuts I'd feel as if I was going to the circus!" He seemed in real holiday mood. Of course they talked baseball until they left the car to walk the intervening block to the athletic field.

"I suppose they don't charge us anything to-day, Tom," he said questioningly as they came in sight of the grounds.

"No, sir."

"Too bad; I feel just like spending money! How do we get in?"

Tom led the way to the gate and they went inside. A handful of boys were lolling on the seats of

the grandstand, looking on, while on the diamond the first team and the scrubs were engaged in a game. Tom saw Sidney on the bench and waved to him. By the time they had found seats in a shady portion of the stand, Sidney had joined them.

"Hello, Tom! How do you do, Mr. Cummings? Is this a holiday?"

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"It is for us, Morris," chuckled Mr. Cummings. "Tom and I sort of sneaked off. Are you playing?"

"Yes, sir, but I don't bat for awhile yet," replied Sidney, taking a seat beside them.

"Then suppose you tell us what's going on. Who's that at bat now?"

"That's Sam Craig. He's our catcher. We're having a practice game with the scrub team, sir. The tall chap at the end of the bench is Frank Warner, our captain. And that's Mr. Talbot standing behind him. He's our coach, you know."

"Good, is he?"

"Yes, sir, one of the best. Everyone likes him. Craig has fanned. That's Pete Farrar coming up now. He's our best pitcher."

"Then I suppose he can't hit," said Mr. Cummings.

"Not very well. Nor," added Sidney smilingly, "pitch much, either. He's the best we have, though."

"Tom was telling me you were hard-up for pitchers. Can't you find a good one in all that crowd? Why, you must have three or four hundred boys in school, haven't you?"

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"Over four hundred, sir, but we haven't found anyone who can pitch much. That is, except one fellow, and we can't get him."

"How is that?" asked Mr. Cummings.

"He has to work." Sidney grinned at Tom, and Tom coloured. "If we got him to pitch for us, we'd be all right, I guess."

"Has to work, eh? That's too bad. Something like Tom here, eh?"

"Very much like him," laughed Sidney. Mr. Cummings looked around questioningly. "It's Tom I'm talking about, Mr. Cummings."

"Tom! Why, I didn't know he could pitch ball." Mr. Cummings faced Tom accusingly. "You never told me that. So you're a young Walter Johnson, are you, son?"

"Sid's just talking," murmured Tom. "I pitch a little, sir."

"He's a dandy at it," declared Sidney warmly, "and everyone wishes he could join the team. But of course he can't."

"I suppose not," agreed Mr. Cummings. "Too bad, too."

"Yes, sir." Sidney was in perfect agreement. Mr. Cummings was silent a minute. Then, "I'd like to see you pitch, Tom," he said.

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"It would be quite a treat," said Tom flippantly. He was a bit embarrassed and the flippancy was meant to disguise the fact. Sidney, who had started to say something, closed his mouth and got up.

"That's three out. I'll have to go. If you stay till we're through, Tom, I'll go back with you."

Tom looked doubtfully at Mr. Cummings. "What inning is it?" he asked.

"Third. We'll only play six, probably. It won't take long. Better see it through."

"Of course we will," replied Mr. Cummings with cheerful decision, stretching his legs comfortably over the back of the bench in front. "This is a holiday with us, Morris. Nothing to do till to-morrow!"

Sidney laughed and hurried away into right field and Mr. Cummings turned to Tom. "How long you been pitching?" he asked.

"Just since last year," responded Tom. "Sid showed me a little about it and then I got a book and studied it. Now there's a man at my boarding-house who used to play professional ball; pitched on some of the minor league teams for eight years; he's teaching me a lot."

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His employer observed him admiringly. "Tom," he said, "you're a smart kid, aren't you? How old are you?"

"Sixteen—and a half."

"Hm! You look more than that. I suppose now you'd like to play with these chaps, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I'd like to very much."

"Well, I wish you could." Mr. Cummings was frowningly silent for awhile. Pete Farrar—a long, rangy, and somewhat seedy youth of seventeen—was in the box for the school nine. He had an eccentric "wind-up" that included whirling his right arm around at the shoulder several times like a wind-mill. But most of the effort went into the "wind-up" and not enough, it seemed, into the delivery. At any rate, his performance that afternoon was pretty poor. He passed the first man up in the first half of the third and was hit for a two-bagger by the second. The scrubs got two runs across in that inning. Tom concluded that he liked the scrubs' pitcher better. He was a youngster

named Moran who, if he put on less "side," seemed to have far better control. But perhaps, Tom charitably added to himself, this was an off-day with Farrar. As the teams changed places again Captain Warner went to bat. Mr. Cummings broke a long silence.

"Tom," he said, "couldn't we fix it somehow so you could play ball? How many games do they play a week?"

"Usually two, sir."

"Well, don't it seem as if you could get off two afternoons?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do any good, sir, because, you see, I'd have to practise with the team if I was to play on it. I guess there isn't any way I could play, Mr. Cummings, unless I was to quit working, and I couldn't afford to do that."

"How much practice would it take?" persisted Mr. Cummings.

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, it seems to me that, if these chaps need you as badly as they say they do, it's a shame you can't play. And I'm going to see if we can't fix it somehow, Tom. I suppose Horace will think I'm crazy, though," he added half aloud.

"I don't mind not playing, sir," Tom assured him. "And—and I wouldn't feel right, anyway, about letting you pay me wages and then not being there."

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"Humph!" said Mr. Cummings. "I guess it wouldn't break us. Who's this coming?"

"Sidney Morris, sir. Oh, that's Mr. Talbot with him!"

"Thought so. Looks as if they were coming here, don't it?"

It did, and in a moment Sidney was introducing the coach to Mr. Cummings. Tom realised then that Sidney had brought Mr. Talbot over for a purpose. And the purpose was not long in declaring itself. There was a minute of polite conversation between the two men and then the coach got down to business.

"Mr. Cummings," he asked, "isn't there some way by which we can get the services of Tom Pollock here? We need him pretty badly on the team. We're in a regular hole as far as pitching goes. Of course I realise that he's working for you and that you need him at your store, but it seems to me that in some way or other we might arrange things so he could pitch for us at least occasionally. We might not need him all the time. If he could pitch, say, one game a week, it would be a big thing for the school."

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"I was just talking it over with Tom," replied Mr. Cummings. "If it can be arranged, I'll be glad, Mr. Talbot. But Tom says he would have to do a lot of practising with the team. Frankly, Mr. Talbot, if I had the whole say of it, I'd send him out here every afternoon, but my partner, Mr. Wright, isn't—well, quite as sympathetic toward baseball as I am!"

"I see. As to practising, why, Pollock's right. But under the circumstances I guess we could be easy with him. You don't expect a pitcher to do much more than play his position, you know. I guess we'd forgive him if he didn't show up very brilliantly at bat and at fielding. What we want is someone who can stand up against some of the big teams we're scheduled to meet this month and next and give us a chance to win now and then. We've got a pretty fair team this year. They're smart fielders and they'll do pretty well at bat in another week or so. But we're certainly shy on pitchers, Mr. Cummings."

"Well, what's your idea?" asked Mr. Cummings.

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"How about three afternoons a week during May and then, say, two after that? I wouldn't ask Pollock to pitch more than once a week, but I'd like to have him come out and get used to the team and let the team get used to him. By the first of June I guess, if he practised once a week, it would be enough to keep him steady."

"I'm willing," replied Tom's employer, "and I'll talk it over with my partner. If I can make him agree, it'll be all right. And—oh, well, I'll pretty near guarantee to talk Horace around! Anyway, we'll settle it in a day or two. But, say, I'm taking your word for all this. How do I know he can really pitch? You ever seen him?"

Mr. Talbot laughed and shook his head. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Cummings, I never have! I'm taking the boys' word for it. Morris here says he can. Healey says so. And Hughes and two or three others."

"That's all right," returned Mr. Cummings gravely, thrusting his hands in his pockets and looking stubborn. "But I'm from Missouri. You'll have to show me!"

Sidney laughed. "What Mr. Cummings wants, I guess, is to have Tom pitch now."

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"Want to try it?" asked Mr. Talbot of Tom.

"If you want me to, sir."

"Well," the coach hesitated, "it's sort of short notice, I suppose, but maybe we'd better convince Mr. Cummings, Pollock. We want him to help us, you see. How would it do if you pitched for the scrubs the next inning or two?"

"I'm willing," replied Tom, "only——" He glanced at the clothes he was wearing.

"Never mind about what you have on," said Mr. Talbot. "You needn't bat, and I guess if you

take your coat and waistcoat off you'll get along all right. They're calling you, Morris. You're up." And as Sidney hurried across to the plate Mr. Talbot went on: "I hope you will succeed with your partner, Mr. Cummings, for we certainly need this chap out here with us. In any case, I'm very much obliged to you for your willingness to help us. Wouldn't you like to look on from the bench?"

Mr. Cummings arose with alacrity and, followed by Tom, accompanied the coach across to the other side of the diamond, where a place was found for him on the players' bench. Buster Healey winked gravely at Tom. [236]

"Get on to Bat being sweet to old Cummings," he whispered to Bert Meyers, who was seated beside him. "He's after Pollock I'll bet a dollar. Bet you he gets him, too!"

Mr. Cummings was introduced to Captain Warner and one or two of the other boys and was quite in his element. Pete Farrar, farther along the bench, viewed Tom's appearance with suspicion. Young Smith, bat in hand, waiting for Sidney to retire from the plate, turned his head toward the bench and whispered hoarsely:

"Pete!"

"Huh?" grunted Pete Farrar.

"Good-bye," said Smithie softly.

Pete only grunted again.

CHAPTER XVIII

TOM TWIRLS FOR THE SCRUBS

 [237]

Tom realised, as he walked over to the mound and picked up the ball, that at least a portion of his audience was hostile. He could not expect Pete Farrar to be wholly pleased at his advent on the scene, and Pete's demeanour showed that he wasn't, while for some less easily explainable reason Captain Warner seemed far from friendly. Not that these things bothered Tom very much, however. He was naturally a little nervous, but I doubt if anyone guessed it. As luck had it, the first three batsmen to confront him were Kenny, Craig, and Farrar, the last trio on the first team's batting-list. Tom knew nothing about them and so wisely relied on the scrub catcher to tell him what to offer.

Tom presented a rather incongruous appearance in the box. He had removed his coat and waistcoat, tied his suspenders around his waist, and rolled up the sleeves of his blue-stripe shirt. Tommy Hughes had supplied him with a cap to take the place of the straw hat he had been wearing. His long trousers struck an odd note amongst the surrounding uniforms. On the bench, Mr. Talbot and Mr. Cummings sat side by side and watched interestedly, the latter a trifle anxiously as well. He was prepared to be very proud of Tom's prowess and was mutely hoping that the boy would not, after all, prove a fiasco. [238]

Arthur Brown, who caught for the scrubs, knelt behind the plate and gave the signal for a fast, straight ball. Tom settled his cap with a tug at the visor, brought his arms back over his head, lifted his left leg in air a little, and pitched. Joe Kenny watched the ball cut the centre of the plate, waist-high, and heard it slap into the big mitt behind him. Then he tapped his bat on the plate, squared himself, and seemed to dare Tom to do it again. And Tom did it again, only this time the ball, instead of whizzing up to the plate, came with deceptive slowness and Kenny hit much too soon. Steve Arbuckle, the team's manager, who was umpiring, watched the ball go dancing along outside third-base-line and announced:

"Foul! Strike two!"

After that Tom tried Kenny with an out-shoot and Joe wisely refused to offer at it and it went as a ball. Then came another ball, a drop that was too low, and then, getting the signal from Brown, Tom shot over a high one that cut the plate squarely in two. Kenny struck at it too late, whirled on his heel, and dragged his bat toward the bench. A chorus of approval arose from Buster and Tommy and some of the others, and Mr. Cummings turned beamingly to the coach. [239]

"How's that?" he demanded. "That's pitching 'em, isn't it?"

The coach smiled approvingly. "He looks good, Mr. Cummings. And I like the way he does it, too. Looks like a born pitcher to me."

"Of course he is!" declared the other convincedly, evidently forgetting that it was he who had evinced doubt of Tom's ability. "That boy's a wonder, Mr. Talbot!"

Sam Craig was the slugging kind of a batter and wanted, as all free hitters do, a ball on the end of his bat. Consequently when, after Tom, at Brown's demand, had offered a high fast ball on the outside of the plate and Craig had slammed at it viciously and narrowly missed it, the catcher signalled for a straight, low one, Tom shook his head. Brown signalled again, and again Tom refused. Mr. Talbot watched eagerly. [240]

"Brown's signalling for something Pollock doesn't want to give him," he said softly to Mr. Cummings. "Evidently Pollock has a head as well as an arm."

"Head!" began Mr. Cummings. But at that moment, Tom and his catcher having reached an agreement, a slow in-shoot floated across the inside of the plate, Craig staggered away from it, and the umpire announced, "Strike two!"

Craig got to first in the end, however, finally taking an inside ball on the handle of his bat and trickling it slowly toward third, so slowly that by the time third baseman had come in and got it and thrown it to first Craig was safe on his bag. But Farrar was an easy proposition. Three fast, straight balls and one slow teaser did for him, and he retired disgruntled to confide to Frank Warner that "that chump hasn't anything but a fast ball and you can knock the spots out of him!"

Buster Healey faced Tom with a grin. "Be easy with me, Tom," he called. "I used to play with you!"

Tom smiled. "Just tell me what you want, Buster," he answered. [241]

"And you won't give it to me," grumbled Buster. "I know!"

Whatever it was Buster did want, it is safe to assume that what he got was something quite different, for Buster, after popping a foul back of first base, went out on strikes.

When Tom came back to the bench, Mr. Talbot was slipping his left hand into a catcher's mitt. "Pollock, come over here and show me what you can do," he said eagerly. "Unless your arm's tired?"

"Not a bit, sir." So while the school team took the field and the scrubs went to bat again Tom pitched to the coach, explaining his deliveries as he sent them in.

"Here's an in-shoot, sir. I try to break it just in front of the plate, but it doesn't always do it."

"Pretty good, though," replied Mr. Talbot, tossing the ball back. "What's your drop like, Pollock?"

Tom showed him, and the coach scrambled the ball out of the dirt. "Seems to me," he said finally, "you've got about everything, Pollock. Give me two or three fast ones now." [242]

And Tom let himself go and slammed in a high one, a low one, and a "waister" that made Mr. Talbot beam.

"Great stuff!" he said. "Where the dickens did you learn to pitch like that, Pollock?"

"There's a man who lives where I do," replied Tom, returning to the bench, "who used to be a professional pitcher. He's been teaching me for a month or more. Maybe you know him. His name is George."

"'Big Ben' George? Yes, but I never knew he'd been a ball-player. Guess I'll have to get him to come out and coach our pitchers for us. He has surely done well by you, Pollock."

When the last of the next and fifth inning began, Tom faced Bert Meyers, the husky third baseman, and Meyers landed on Tom's first offering and cracked it far into left field, getting two bases. As Tom did not yet trust himself to throw to bases, he left Meyers to his own devices, much to the surprise of that youth and to the chagrin of the scrub second baseman. Frank Warner was the next man up, and, as the captain was something of a hitter, perhaps it was as well that Tom gave him all his attention instead of sharing it with Meyers. [243]

Tom realised that it might be a diplomatic act to "let Frank down easy." He was certain that the captain for some reason rather disliked him already, and knew that if he managed to strike him out that dislike would not lessen any. But the scrub team had gained a one-run lead in their half of the final inning and Tom concluded that to deliberately endanger the scrubs' victory would be hardly fair, even if by so doing he managed to partly placate Captain Warner. So Tom set himself very carefully to dispose of the redoubtable one.

On second, Bert Meyers was taking all sorts of leads and yelling like a Comanche Indian in an effort to disturb the pitcher. If he had only known it, he could have stolen third base with impunity, for Tom had determined to take no risks of hurriedly pegging the ball into the outfield. But Tom's cool scrutiny fooled Bert. Every time Tom wound up Bert dashed up the base-line, but he always stopped short of a steal and scuttled back to safety as the ball went to the catcher. Bert was big and rangy, but not a fast man on bases. [244]

Tom's first offering to Frank Warner almost brought about disaster. It was an in-shoot and it broke badly, passing over the plate "in the groove." Frank swung at it and struck it and dashed for first, but the ball was a foul by a bare two inches when it struck back of third. After that Tom was more cautious. A wide one was wasted and then Tom worked a drop that fooled Frank so badly that the players on the bench chuckled audibly as he recovered himself after a vicious swipe at empty air. A rather ugly expression came into the captain's face then. He didn't like being made a fool of. A fast ball that went over too high counted against the pitcher. Then Frank landed on a low one and popped a foul into the stand. Tom had only one more to waste, and when Arthur Brown asked for a curve Tom shook his head. What he did send in was a slow ball, Frank, angry and anxious to hit, did just what Tom thought he would do. He struck too soon, the ball passed under his bat, and, although Brown dropped the strike, Frank was too disgruntled to try for his base.

Tommy Hughes was easy for Tom, four pitched balls disposing of him, and the game was over, the scrubs winning by a score of seven to six. Arthur Brown, tossing aside his mask, intercepted Tom on his way to the bench. "That's some pitching, Pollock," he declared admiringly. "I'd like to catch you all the time!" [245]

"Well, I guess you did as much as I did," answered Tom. "Glad I helped you win, though."

Frank Warner lounged over to where Tom, assisted by the proud and delighted Mr. Cummings, was donning his coat. "That's quite a drop you have, Pollock," he said patronisingly. "You want to practise up on your curves, though. It won't do to break 'em over the plate, you know. Mr. Talbot says you're coming out for the team."

"I don't know yet. If I can, I will."

"Glad to have you. We need more pitchers." The captain nodded carelessly and turned away. Mr. Cummings chuckled.

"He's sore because you struck him out, son," he said. "I was glad you did, too. Sort of a stuck-up fellow, isn't he?"

Tom, Sidney, Mr. Cummings, and Coach Talbot walked over to the trolley line together and boarded the same car. Sidney, before he dropped off at Alameda Avenue, made Tom promise to come around to see him that evening. As they neared the store, Mr. Cummings, who had been talking with Mr. Talbot most of the way, turned to Tom.

"Tom, you might as well go on home," he said. "It's almost half-past five. I'm going to talk to Mr. Wright about you while I'm feeling brave," he added, "and I guess I'll get on better if you're not there."

"If there's anything I can do to help," offered Mr. Talbot, "I'll be very glad to stop in with you."

"N-no, I guess not, thanks. If it comes out all right, I'll let you know and Tom can start in with you Monday."

When Tom reached home he found Mr. George pitching at the fence in the side-yard. "Hello, Tom, you're home early," he said. "Haven't been fired, have you?"

"Not exactly," laughed Tom. "I've been pitching for the high school scrub team. Five strike-outs in two innings, Mr. George!"

"Well, that's going some, Tom. Let's hear about it."

So Tom recounted the happenings of the afternoon and the detective was delighted that Tom was to have a chance to put into practice what he had taught him. Mr. Talbot's suggestion that he come out and coach the pitchers pleased him, too.

"Say, I'd like to do that if I had the time," he declared.

"I think he'd like to have you. I know I would. Why don't you talk it over with him? You know him, don't you?"

"Yes, Bat's handled a few small cases for the railroad. That's how I met him. He's a nice fellow. Maybe I'll look him up this evening and see what he says. Too tired to practice, are you?"

"No, I'm not tired at all. I only worked two innings and didn't have to bat. I guess I'll rest a little while, though, first. What were you doing when I came in?"

Mr. George smiled at the ball he held. "Say, I was trying to get the knack of the 'knuckle-ball' that fellow Summers, of the Detroit's, pitches. Haven't got it yet, though. Here's the idea, though, as I figure it out. You double back your middle fingers like this and hold the ball with your thumb and little finger. It's not easy, though. Try it."

Tom took the ball and strove to get a grip on it in the manner shown. "That's it, isn't it?" he asked finally. "But I'd never be able to pitch it that way. Why, it would just fall out! I wouldn't have any control over it!"

"That's the way it seemed to me until I tried it, but I'm getting the hang of it. It's a great ball when it's done right; looks like a fast one and floats over as slow as an ice-wagon going up hill! When I learn it, I'll show it to you, Tom. Say, I'm mighty glad you're going to pitch for those fellows! Bet you anything we just mow 'em down this spring, Tom!"

"Well, it isn't settled yet. Mr. Wright may not agree to it."

"Pshaw! What's the reason he won't? You tell him if he doesn't he's got to look out for me, son! I'm liable to put a dent in him!"

CHAPTER XIX

WITH THE TEAM

It wasn't necessary, however, for the detective to put any dents in Mr. Wright, for the next morning Mr. Cummings informed Tom that it was all arranged. "It wasn't so easy to bring him around, Tom, but he came after awhile. I told him, among other things, that it would be good business. Said we sold a lot of things to the high school boys and that if you played ball with them and won games for them it would make us more popular than ever and we'd get more trade." Mr. Cummings paused to chuckle reminiscently. "I sort of think that's what did the business, son. After that he listened real patiently and finally gave in. So you're to have three afternoons off every week this month and two next. You'd better see Mr. Talbot yourself and see what days he

wants you. I guess Monday had better be one of them, for that's usually rather a dull day with us. Then Wednesday and Saturday might do for the others."

Tom thanked Mr. Cummings gratefully.

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"Seems to me, though, it would be fairer if you were to take something off my wages until the baseball season's over," he urged. "I—I'd feel better about it."

"Well, I suggested that to Horace, but he turned on me and nearly bit my head off. Said, so long as we didn't have to get anyone in to take your place while you were out, he guessed we needn't be so tarnation mean as all that! I guess we won't quarrel about a dollar or so, Tom. After all, there is something in what I told Horace about getting more trade by letting you play with the team, and I guess we don't stand to lose anything."

Mr. Talbot suggested Thursdays instead of Wednesdays as one of the days, since the midweek games were played on Wednesdays and he believed Tom could learn more on a practice afternoon. So it was finally arranged that Tom was to report for practice on Monday and Thursday afternoons and for play on Saturdays until June. After that Thursdays and Saturdays were to suffice. Meanwhile Mr. George had talked with the coach and had agreed to go out to the field twice a week, and oftener if he could, and take the pitchers in hand. Tom couldn't determine which seemed the most pleased, Mr. Talbot or Mr. George!

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Tom's first practice with the team took place the next Monday. He had supplied himself with a uniform and felt both proud and a trifle self-conscious as he walked onto the field in company with Sidney and Tommy Hughes. Nothing very exciting fell to his lot that day. For a half-hour he pitched to the batsmen in front of the net, and later sat on the bench and watched Pete Farrar and Toby Williams work in the box. Mr. Talbot instructed him to observe the fielding methods and watch particularly the conduct of the pitchers with men on bases. Tom soon saw that a pitcher had more to do than pitch. He had to handle balls in his own territory, cover first base on many occasions, and run up to the plate whenever a ball went past the catcher. He also learned things about holding the runners on bases, envying the dexterity with which Pete Farrar, who, like Tom, was a right-handed pitcher, whirled about to step from the box and peg the ball to first or second. Tom did not get into the practice game at all that afternoon, Mr. Talbot probably thinking that it would do him more good to look on from the bench. Captain Warner was friendly in a rather chilly way, but Pete Farrar quite evidently regarded him as an unwelcome interloper. The rest of the fellows, though, showed him that he was more than welcome. His advent had caused a sensation and practice was attended by nearly the entire school. Had they but known it, Cummings and Wright had already received a good many dollars' worth of gratuitous advertisement!

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On Thursday practice was harder and more prolonged than on any day thus far, perhaps owing to the fact that on the preceding day the team, with Pete Farrar pitching four disastrous innings and Toby Williams finishing the game, had gone down in overwhelming defeat before a nine composed of high school graduates led by Walter White. There was nearly an hour of batting practice, a good thirty minutes of fielding work, with Manager Arbuckle knocking fungoes to the outfield and Coach Talbot hitting balls to the basemen. Tom had his first practice in base-running that afternoon and discovered that he had a lot to learn. The first time he attempted a slide he landed a yard short of second and was easily out. Later the two teams played four innings, and Tom pitched again for the scrubs. Whether his previous exertions were responsible for his poor showing, I can't say. But he got a severe drubbing that afternoon and went home surprised and discouraged.

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"What could you expect?" asked Mr. George. "You were tired. Seems to me funny that Bat would let you pitch after having you run bases. Maybe, though, he meant to show you something you didn't know, Tom." Tom looked a question, and Mr. George added: "That you can't do good work in the box if you're not fresh and fit."

Mr. George himself took hold of his part of the coaching the following afternoon. As it was a Friday, Tom was not on hand, but Mr. George told him about it when they met before dinner.

"A nice lot of fellows," he said. "I had a real good time out there. That kid Williams is going to make a pitcher some day if he sticks at it. He's a smooth little article, Tom. Of course he's young yet, but he shows a lot of promise. The older fellow, Farrar, will never do anything. He's got started all wrong and he won't let anyone tell him anything. He hasn't any head, either. He will be some better when I get through with him, I guess, but he won't ever amount to much."

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The baseball squad took to the big, quiet-mannered, good-hearted detective at once; Tom saw that the next day. Mr. George even threatened to rival Coach Talbot in the affections of the boys. The team journeyed to Minturn on Saturday, and Tom went along. The game with the Minturn team was a loosely played contest, which the Brown-and-Blue won by the one-sided score of 14 to 3. Tom pitched three innings, relieving Pete Farrar in the seventh. He wasn't forced to extend himself any to dispose of the Minturn hitters that faced him. He struck out five, made one put-out, and assisted twice. At bat, which he reached but once, he managed to make a rather scratchy hit and got as far as second when Buster slashed a hard one down the left alley. Then he performed a "bone-head" play that ended his chances of scoring and put the side out. Bert Meyers popped a high infield fly and Tom started for third before the frenzied cries of the coaches could stop him. By the time he was racing back to his base the Minturn first baseman had caught the fly and pegged the ball across to shortstop and Tom made the third out. He felt very much ashamed of himself and rather expected censure from Coach Talbot. But all the latter said as Tom went over to the bench was, "Infield flies are bad things to run on, Pollock."

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Captain Warner, however, was not so lenient, and regarded Tom with a scowl as he passed him on his way to second. "You want to keep your wits about you, Pollock," he said severely, "when you play this game. Don't you know enough to hold your base on an infield fly, when there's only one out?"

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. Warner grunted.

To atone for his mistake, Tom set to work and ended the contest then and there, disposing of the next three batsmen with exactly thirteen pitched balls. The victory, however, was not one to be very proud of, for the error column of Manager Arbuckle's score-sheet showed seven little black dots.

It was the Monday morning following the Minturn game that Tom stopped for a minute to watch the work on the new office building. The concrete foundation piers were in place and big steel girders were being lifted about by towering cranes like so many jack-straws. While he watched at the edge of the throng, the contractor to whom Mr. Cummings had sold the pump passed and chanced to catch sight of him. [256]

"Hello!" he said, turning back with a smile, "aren't you the boy who told me about that pump that Cummings sold me?"

"Yes, sir. Was it all right?"

"Yes, it saved us a lot of money, I guess. Are you still with Cummings?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ask him if he wants to buy it back, then. I'm through with it. Any fair offer takes it."

The contractor nodded and hurried on, and Tom took up his journey again. He didn't go far, though. Presently he was back at the corner, where a minute's search discovered the contractor.

"Mr. Cummings will give five dollars for that pump, sir," he announced.

"Five dollars!" The contractor stared and then laughed. "Well, he isn't risking his money to-day, is he? You tell Cummings——" Then he paused. "Will he take it away to-day at that price?" [257]

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Tell him to come and get it."

At the store Tom sought Mr. Cummings. "Will you loan me five dollars, please, sir, until I can get it from the bank?" he asked.

"I guess we can accommodate you, Mr. Pollock," responded the senior partner with a smile. "Miss Miller, give Tom five dollars and put it on memorandum, please. He wants to return it to-day. What are you doing, Tom? Buying stocks this morning?"

"Pumps," laughed Tom. "I'm going to take back that pump we sold. Could I store it in the cellar again?"

"What! Don't tell me that white elephant is coming back!" exclaimed Mr. Cummings in mock dismay.

"Yes, sir, he offered to sell it and I said you'd give him five dollars for it and take it away to-day. Don't you think it's worth five dollars?"

"Of course it is! Hang it, Tom, if you had a dozen pumps, I'll bet you'd be a millionaire by the end of the year! I don't see, though, why he'd want to sell it for five dollars. It would be worth that much for old iron." [258]

"I guess he bought another one, sir. Anyway, he said he was through with it. He seemed to think five dollars wasn't very much for it."

"I should say it wasn't!"

"But he took it," added Tom. "So I'm going to bring it over here and put it in the basement again, if you don't mind. Maybe I'll be able to sell it again some day."

"Sell it again! Why, Tom, I expect you'll get rich on that old pump!"

"I'll be about eighteen dollars behind to-night, sir."

"What? Didn't I hand you over a sixty-dollar check only a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yes, sir," Tom laughed, "but you must remember that I'd already paid sixty dollars for it."

"That's so," acknowledged Mr. Cummings. "Well, send it along, Tom, and I'll look after it when it comes. And I'll see if I can't find a buyer for you."

One afternoon Mr. George announced that he had conquered the science of pitching the "knuckle-ball" and set about teaching it to Tom. It wasn't easy, for Tom's hand was rather small and his fingers short. In the end, though, he learned to pitch the deceptive ball fairly well, although it never became a favourite offering with him. It did serve him well, however, on many occasions, for the "knuckle-ball," when properly delivered, is particularly deceptive. Twice a week the high school team met an opponent and marked up a victory or defeat. The team was showing progress each week, but was playing erratically. Several times contests that should have resulted in easy wins for Amesville became victories for their opponents, while, to balance things up, more than once a game that was conceded to the enemy at the start was turned into a triumph for the Brown-and-Blue. Mr. George worked wonders with the battery candidates, for he didn't confine himself altogether to the pitchers. Sam Craig learned many a trick from the new [259]

coach. Pete Farrar showed improvement over his early-season form, while Toby Williams was fast developing into a brilliant pitcher. Only his youthfulness kept Williams back. He hadn't the strength to pitch nine hard innings and he was never allowed to attempt that feat. But as a relief pitcher he was a big success. The first of June Mr. George, unfortunately for the pitching staff, had to go away and was gone for nearly a fortnight. Tom missed him a good deal, for, although he went into the yard by himself before dinner and practised his curves and breaks, and quite often found someone to don the catcher's mitt and stand in front of him, it was not like having the detective there to advise and instruct.

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Tom's two afternoons of practice had greatly improved his playing. As a batsman he would doubtless never perform in the three-hundred class, but he was fully as good with the stick as two or three other players who had won places on the team. He soon learned how to field his position and became so adept at throwing to bases that runners no longer took daring leads when he was on the mound. He and Buster, who played first, got so that they worked together like machinery and many an unfortunate runner was caught off just when things looked their brightest.

When June came Tom's two afternoons of practice became one, but by that time one was sufficient to keep him in condition, since he always had a half-hour workout every day before dinner. Mr. Cummings followed the fortunes of the high school team, and of Tom especially, with great interest. Once or twice a week, usually when there was a game to be played, he would go out to the field and take his place on the players' bench, evidently under the impression that Mr. Talbot's original invitation held good for the season. No one, however, ever disputed his right to the privilege and the players seemed to like to have him there.

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Sometimes in the evenings Sidney and Tom and one or two of the neighbourhood youths would appear in the vacant lot near Sidney's home and play ball, but as a general thing Tom and Sidney had had about enough of baseball by dinner time and their evenings were more likely to be spent in less strenuous ways. The Saturday games didn't interfere with Tom's trips to Derry and he always spent Sundays at the farm. He had told Uncle Israel about disposing of the pump, and Uncle Israel had merely commented to the effect that all the fools weren't dead yet! But he had, Tom thought, seemed a bit pleased, nevertheless. When, later, Tom informed him smilingly that he had bought the pump back again, Uncle Israel stared and grunted.

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"Seems like you were well enough rid of it before," he said dryly. "I suppose you expect to find another idiot, eh?"

"Well, I hope to find someone who wants a good pump and is willing to pay half of what it's worth. Besides, if I can't sell it, I guess it will always be worth five or six dollars as junk."

"Maybe, maybe," replied Uncle Israel with a wave of his big hand. "Anyway, it's your affair."

On the first Saturday in June, Amesville was to play its first of three contests with Petersburg High School. Petersburg High was Amesville's principal rival in all sports and the success of the baseball season was judged by the outcome of the Petersburg series. Naturally Tom expected to go into the box for the high school that afternoon and was much surprised when, after he and Pete Farrar and Toby Williams had warmed up, Coach Talbot announced that Farrar was to begin the game. Sidney, who was seated beside Tom on the bench, grumbled.

"That's a silly way to do," he said. "Pete'll put us in a hole and then you'll have to go and pull the game out of the fire. I don't see why he doesn't let you start it."

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"He wanted to," said Tommy Hughes, at Sidney's elbow, speaking in low tones, "but Frank threw a fit about it. Bat knuckled right under to him. I thought he had more backbone."

To tell the truth, Tommy had looked for a quarrel between coach and captain and was not a little disappointed! Sidney took up the cudgels for Mr. Talbot.

"Bat knows what he's doing," he said stoutly. "Don't you worry, Tommy. I dare say he just wants to show Frank that Pete isn't any good against a hard-hitting bunch like Petersburg."

"I like that!" exclaimed Tommy aggrievedly. "Why, you were just criticising Bat yourself!"

"Not at all," returned Sidney loftily. "I only said——"

But what he said didn't appear, for just then the home team was called on to take the field.

CHAPTER XX

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AMESVILLE LOSES THE GAME

Pete Farrar had his troubles from the very first instant. After getting a strike on the batsman, he offered one in the groove and the head of the Petersburg batting-list cracked it out for two bases. That seemed to disconcert Pete a good deal. He passed the next man up, tried unavailingly to catch the first runner off second, and finally allowed the third man to send up a long sacrifice fly to the outfield, which scored one run and left a man on third. Good fielding disposed of the next two batters, and Amesville crawled out of a bad situation.

It was not until the third inning that the local team got her first man over the plate. Then a hit by Bert Meyers, a sacrifice by Frank Warner, and an error by third baseman allowed Bert to

score. At one to one the game went into the fifth. Then, with the opposing pitcher at bat, Pete Farrar got careless. During four innings he had saved himself time and again "by the skin of his teeth," to use a handy expression, or had been saved by the players behind him. Now, though, he went all bad. The Petersburg pitcher was handed his base on balls and promptly and unexpectedly stole second. The next man landed on Pete's first offering and sent it down the right alley, scoring the pitcher. A two-bagger by the opponent's third baseman put men on third and second and both players scored a minute later when Captain Warner pegged the ball four feet over Buster's head. Then Pete struck a batsman on the shoulder with a wild ball and there were runners on first and second and still no one out. Pete made an effort to settle down then, after Frank Warner and Sam Craig had both talked with him, and succeeded in striking out the next batsman and causing the following one to pop a fly into shortstop's hands. But with two out there was still trouble in store for Pete. He seemed quite unable to locate the plate and another man walked and the bases were filled.

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It was then that Coach Talbot signalled to Captain Warner, and Warner called for time. Tom and Toby Williams had each been warming up, and now Mr. Talbot told Tom to go in. But when he reached the box where Captain Warner and Pete Farrar were talking together, the former turned to him with a scowl.

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"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Mr. Talbot sent me in to pitch," responded Tom mildly.

"Well, you can walk right back," said Pete. "I'm on this job."

Tom looked inquiringly at Frank Warner. The latter frowned and nodded.

"That's right, Pollock. Run along. I'm running this team and not Bat Talbot."

Tom retraced his steps to the bench, meeting the surprised and curious looks of his teammates. Mr. Talbot said nothing, merely nodded understandingly.

Pete faced the next batsman and the infielders moved in toward the plate. It was a crucial moment and the stand, which had been pretty noisy most of the game, settled into silence. One ball went wide and a few jeers greeted Pete. The next, however, was a strike and a burst of applause followed. Then came another ball. On the bases the runners were ready to streak along the path at the smallest opportunity. Another strike—a low ball that just cut the outer edge of the plate—brought sighs of relief to the Amesville supporters. Then a foul went back of first and another glanced off the bat and was almost captured by Sam Craig. A wide one which the batsman refused brought the score two and three and Pete had put himself in a hole. Another foul past first spoiled one offering and then Pete put a fast one straight across and the batsman landed on it hard. In raced the men on bases and far out into the field sped the ball. But Sidney proved the hero of that occasion, for, running like a streak to his left, he made the catch at full speed, rolling over a few times on the grass as an added divertisement!

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In the last of the sixth Amesville managed to almost close up her distance, scoring two runs on two hits and an error by centre fielder. The score was now four to three and everyone looked to see either Tom or Toby Williams walk to the box when the last half of the inning began. But Captain Warner, offended by what he termed Mr. Talbot's interference, was stubborn. "Pete's all right," he declared to the coach. "He had a bad inning; they all do; but that's over with. He can hold them all right. You'll see."

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Mr. Talbot doubted it, but said nothing more and Pete went back again. He got through the seventh inning in very good shape, striking out two of the men who faced him. A runner reached second on a hit past shortstop, but the fourth batsman slammed a liner into third baseman's glove.

Try as she might, however, Amesville was unable to add to her score in the seventh or eighth, while Petersburg got two on in the ninth, but failed to tally. In the last of the inning Smithie, first at bat, caught one where he liked it and slammed it into short centre for a base. Joe Kenny walked and Sam Craig advanced the runners with a sacrifice. Pete Farrar went out, third to first, and Buster managed to bring in the tying run with a slashing hit to second baseman too hot for that youth to handle. Then Bert Meyers hit into a double and the side was out. But the score was now four to four and Amesville in the stand shouted excitedly and demanded a new pitcher.

"Put in Pollock!" was the cry. "We want this game!"

But Frank Warner was obdurate, and Coach Talbot let him have his way. Pete Farrar went back to the box and the audience, after a moment of amazed surprise, gave voice to disapprobation.

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"Take him out!" "Give us a pitcher!" "Say, Bat, use your bean!" "Put in Tom Pollock!" "Take him out!"

Mr. Talbot, on the bench, showed neither by word nor sign that he heard. Perhaps Captain Warner really believed Pete capable of holding the visitors for another inning. If he did, events proved him greatly mistaken, for that first half of the ninth was a veritable Waterloo for Pete. The Petersburg players landed on his slants and smashed them into all parts of the field. Not a man came to bat who didn't connect safely with one of Pete's offerings, and seven men faced him before that devastating inning was over. The stand howled protest and derision, and once Sam Craig, who had striven heroically all through the game to stave off defeat, literally threw up his hands. This was when Pete, in a rage at the storm of ridicule from the spectators, pitched a ball that went fully four feet wide of the plate. Sam spread his arms wide and made no effort to get the ball until it had struck the dirt and bounded from the back-stop, by which time Petersburg

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had scored her fourth run of the inning. I think Pete might have kept on pitching until darkness put a stop to the massacre had not the infield taken matters into their own hands and, assisted by the Petersburg runners, who, with the score eight to four, seemed assured of the victory, finally ended the inning. Sam Craig heaved the ball to Smithie and the shortstop, jumping across the second bag, sped it on to Bert Meyers at third. The runners at each station were caught napping and were called out, and when, a minute later, Sam again threw to second and cut off a steal, the worst was over.

That last half of the tenth was a forlorn hope for the home team. Frank Warner, smarting under the unuttered criticism of his team-mates, went very determinedly to bat and hit safely past second baseman. But, although Tommy Hughes laid down a sacrifice bunt and put the runner on second, he got no farther. Sidney was an easy out, third to first, and Smithie popped a foul into the catcher's hands.

On the way back to town Mr. Cummings squeezed himself into the seat between Tom and Sidney. Mr. Cummings was wildly indignant. He told them just how the game should have been played and made disparaging remarks about Pete Farrar in such a loud voice that Tom was on tenterhooks lest Pete, who was only two seats ahead, should hear. [271]

That first game of the Petersburg series caused all sorts of commotion in school. Those who did not know the true inwardness of the matter blamed Coach Talbot for the loss of the contest, while of those who did know many still blamed him for not using his authority and taking Pete out of the box in the fifth inning in spite of Captain Warner. Indignation meetings were numerous on the following Monday and there was talk of a petition requesting Frank Warner's resignation and many demands for a new coach. But by the middle of the week the fellows calmed down and decided to await the outcome of the next game before taking steps. The next meeting between the rivals was to take place two weeks from the first contest and was to be held at Petersburg, while the deciding game, if necessary, was to be played a week later at Amesville.

In the meanwhile Pete Farrar was far from popular, although he blustered around much as usual and had plenty of explanations to offer all who would listen to them. Nor was Frank Warner much more in favour. Amesville took the Petersburg games pretty seriously and even the final examinations, which were now causing trouble for many of the pupils, failed to take the fellows' minds away from baseball. [272]

Tom got through his examinations very well, if not exactly with flying colours. It was hard to serve two masters just then and I fancy Tom would have got higher marks in an examination on baseball than he did on his school courses. But he got by fairly creditably, for all of that. Sidney, who was always a brilliant student, did so well, though, that Tom felt rather humiliated. Sidney was now very full of plans and details for the graduation party, for he had been elected a member of the committee having that important function in charge, and Tom saw less of him than usual. At the store the early spring business had quieted down. June, for some reason, was generally a dull month. The sporting goods department had done a wonderful business that year, and even Mr. Wright took occasion to compliment Tom on the fact. [273]

"Very satisfactory, Tom, very satisfactory," he declared, drumming nervously on the top of the showcase. "We—ah—we think you deserve much credit. And we've decided that—er—well, Mr. Cummings will tell you about that."

Mr. Cummings, however, had already told him. Tom was to have an increase in wages in September, on the completion of his second year in the store. His salary was to be eight dollars a week instead of five. Moreover, when Tom was through school and could give his entire time to the business, he was to be paid twelve dollars; and Mr. Cummings hoped, he said, that Tom would decide to stay with them. Tom replied that he had no desire to leave.

"Well, we don't want you to, Tom. You've made a paying thing of that department of yours and I don't see why it shouldn't be developed even more, nor why, when you have more time to give to it, it shouldn't make more money for us than it's doing now. And you mustn't think that twelve dollars is as far as you can go with us, either. We're willing to pay for what we get, Tom, and just as soon as you can show us you're worth fifteen or twenty or even thirty, son, you'll get it." [274]

Life looked very bright to Tom just then, and when, on the next Saturday afternoon, he pitched Amesville High to a hard-won victory over Lynton, going the whole nine innings without a falter and receiving the best of support from his team-mates, his cup of happiness seemed filled to overflowing. Mr. George returned on the morning of that day, watched his protégé perform, and had all sorts of nice things to say to him afterward. To be sure, there was criticism interspersed with the praise, for naturally enough Tom still showed inexperience, but Tom was quite as grateful for the criticism as for the praise. Mr. Cummings rubbed his hands all the way back—he seldom missed a game now—and beamed proudly upon Tom. One would have thought from the senior partner's attitude toward the boy that he was directly responsible for the latter's baseball prowess! The school viewed Tom as a hero and impatiently reiterated its former conundrum, Why had not Tom been allowed to pitch against Petersburg?

"Just wait until next Saturday, though," it said confidently. "We won't do a thing to those dubs, with Pollock in the box! Just watch us!" [275]

There was no Wednesday game that week, as it happened, since Turner's Falls cancelled her date because of the illness of two of her best players. But there were four days of the hardest sort of practice. And the fellows stood in need of it, since examinations had seriously interfered with the attendance of late. Tom spent Wednesday afternoon with the team and worked hard, so hard that Mr. George forbade practice in the side-yard when they returned home.

"It won't do to run any risks with your arm, Tom," he said. "I suppose they'll pitch you Saturday. Can't see what else they can do. So you want to take things easy, son."

The next afternoon—examinations were about over and Tom had returned to the store directly after lunch—he was called to the telephone. It was a neighbour of Uncle Israel's speaking. Aunt Patty had asked her to tell Tom that his uncle was very ill and to say that he had better come home. Tom caught a train at a few minutes past four and went out to Derry. Uncle Israel had caught cold a day or two before and was pretty sick, Aunt Patty explained anxiously. The doctor came soon after Tom arrived and was not very encouraging. It was lung congestion, he said, and Mr. Bowles was a very ill man. Whether pneumonia would result he wouldn't predict. Aunt Patty took full command of the situation, a neighbour came in to cook, and Tom and John Green sat down to a very cheerless supper. Friday morning Uncle Israel was rather worse than better, and Tom, remembering that he was to accompany the baseball team to Petersburg the next day, considered calling up Mr. Talbot on the telephone and reporting the situation. But the nearest telephone was at a neighbour's house, a full half-mile distant—Uncle Israel had always refused to have anything to do with such a silly contraption—and Tom decided to wait until morning. He had already informed Mr. Cummings that he would not be back for a day or two. Saturday morning, after an anxious night of it, Uncle Israel's condition was improved and when, at about eleven o'clock, the doctor arrived he declared that all danger was passed and that careful nursing and proper diet would bring the patient around as well as ever. Tom talked it over with Aunt Patty, and Aunt Patty said he had better go back. [276]

"Sakes alive," she said, "there ain't anything you can do here, Tom. If a man's needed, why, there's John; not that I'm pretending he's much use, though!" (This for the benefit of the hired man who had just stamped in with fire-wood and who only grinned and winked at Tom.) "Just you run along and play your games, Tom. You'll come back again to-night, anyway, I s'pose?" [277]

Tom hurriedly answered that he would, and sprinted for the station, just managing to catch the last train that might get him to Amesville in time to join the team on its trip to Petersburg. But the train, a slow one at best, took longer than usual to dawdle into Amesville, and when Tom, after stopping at Mrs. Tully's to change into his uniform, reached the place from which the special car was to leave, there was no car in sight and inquiry elicited the fact that it had been gone a full ten minutes. The next regular trolley car for Petersburg was not due to leave until a quarter-past one. There was nothing for it but to make the best of a bad situation. Tom ate a hurried lunch at a small restaurant nearby, all the while keeping a close watch on the clock. When, finally, he dashed back to the trolley station he felt very uncomfortable inside. The car swung up and Tom climbed aboard. He was not fortunate enough to get a seat and so stood on the rear platform. The conductor, in reply to Tom's inquiry, told him that the car would reach Petersburg at ten minutes past two, if it was on time. Tom silently hoped that it would be, because the game was to begin at two-thirty. [278]

But that car seemed possessed of a spirit of procrastination and delay. At every siding, after it had passed into the country, it stood and waited interminable hours, as it seemed to Tom, while some car bound in the opposite direction appeared leisurely in the distance, bore down upon them and, finally, sidled past. A mile outside of Petersburg it seemed determined to take root. Tom asked what the trouble was—he had secured a seat by this time—and the conductor paused long enough to inform him that the south-bound car was twelve minutes late. It was already five minutes past two and Petersburg was a mile away. And, besides that, Tom hadn't the least idea where the ball ground was. Another five minutes passed and still no car appeared. Tom's nerves were getting panicky. The twelve minutes were already gone. He had only twenty minutes left before the game. He dropped off the car and started up the track. [279]

Five minutes later a road appeared and he climbed a fence and reached it, hoping that a vehicle would come along and give him a lift. But no vehicle appeared and it was almost half-past when, much out of breath and very hot, he walked into the town. Luckily the ball ground was only a block or two away from where he made an inquiry and he actually reached the gate on the instant of half-past two. He had difficulty convincing the youth who presided at the entrance that he was a member of the visiting team, but finally succeeded and hurried in. The teams were still warming up as Tom appeared. Mr. Talbot caught sight of him and greeted him with a frown.

"Well, we thought you weren't coming, Pollock," he said. "What was the trouble?"

"I couldn't leave home until late, sir, and when I got uptown the car had gone. I came along on the next one. I'm sorry, sir." [280]

He didn't explain that he had walked a mile or more or that he felt about as little like pitching baseball as anyone could! Mr. Talbot viewed him doubtfully.

"Well, you'd better sit down and get cooled off. How's your arm?"

"All right, sir."

"Hm! We'd just decided to let Williams start. Perhaps he had better, anyway. Captain Warner!"

In response to the hail Frank Warner joined them by the bench. "Here's Pollock," said the coach. "He missed a train or something. What do you think about him? Shall we start him or let Williams go in?"

Frank nodded to Tom. "Why, Pollock's here, Mr. Talbot, and he might as well pitch," he answered. "He's all right, isn't he?"

"I guess so. I only wondered whether to save him for a few innings."

"I don't think it's wise to take any chances," replied Frank. "We need this game, you know, sir."

Mr. Talbot nodded assent, glanced at his watch, and turned again to Tom. "If you're to start this," he said, "you'd better warm up. Johnson, come over here and catch Pollock, will you?"

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Johnson, who played first base on the scrubs and had accompanied the team as a substitute infielder, backed against the netting and Tom unlimbered. It was nearly twenty minutes to three now and Petersburg was clamouring for the start. Mr. Talbot was talking to the umpire, a small ferret-eyed man in a dingy blue baseball jacket, and Tom fancied that he was merely trying to delay the game long enough to allow him to warm up. Pete Farrar and Toby Williams had finished their preliminary exercise and gone back to the visitors' bench. Pete had frowned upon Tom's belated arrival, but Toby, who had more to lose to-day by Tom's advent, waved cheerfully to him.

It took only three or four passes of the ball to inform Tom that the morning's exertion and nervous anxiety had left him in poor shape to pitch his best game, but as he went on his arm and wrist regained something of their skill. He wished that Mr. George was there. He'd have felt more confident. But the detective had not accompanied the team to-day.

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"All right, fellows," announced Captain Warner. "High School at the bat. You're up, Buster."

And Tom, rolling the ball toward the bench, followed it and took his place, regretful that he had not had another ten minutes of work.

CHAPTER XXI

KNOCKED OUT OF THE BOX

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Amesville had her batting eye with her to-day and Buster started things moving at once. By the time Tommy Hughes was thrown out at second on an attempted steal one run had crossed the plate and the fifty or sixty youths who had followed the Amesville team to the enemy's lair were cheering hilariously. And when Tom stepped into the pitcher's box they cheered again.

From the first it was evident that Tom's offerings were not breaking right. Clever fielding held Petersburg away from the platter, but two hits were made off Tom in that initial inning and one man got as far as third.

In the second neither side scored. Calvert, the Petersburg pitcher, settled down and quickly disposed of the next three batters on the Amesville list, and Tom managed to strike out the opposing catcher and pitcher, no great feat, and then gave a base on balls to the head of the Petersburg list. But a long fly was pulled down by Tommy Hughes, out in centre, and the trouble was over.

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Things went along uneventfully until the fourth, Tom now and then showing a flash of real form and receiving eager applause from his school-mates on such occasions. But it was sharp infield work that held the enemy at bay through those first four innings, for Tom's slants were not difficult to reach to-day and more than once the smallest ounce of luck would have slid a Petersburg runner across the plate. In the first of the fourth Amesville filled the bases by some slashing stick-work on the part of Meyers, Warner, and Morris, Sidney contributing a pretty bunt that rolled along first-base-line so slowly that neither pitcher nor first baseman could reach it before Sidney had crossed the bag. Then Smithie brought groans of disappointment by fanning. With two gone, it was up to Joe Kenny, and Joe was not much of a hitter. But by looking and acting anxious to hit, Joe caused the Petersburg pitcher to waste two balls. Then a strike went over and then a third ball was called. After that Joe had only to wait. A second strike followed, but what should have been a third went a little wide of base and Joe walked, pushing in a run. The Petersburg pitcher had a touch of nerves then and Sam Craig slammed safely for a base, scoring two more and going to second on the throw to the plate. Amesville was howling joyfully now, and Petersburg was anxious. There was a conference in the box between the Petersburg pitcher and captain, while Tom took his position at the plate. Joe Kenny was on third and Sam Craig on second, and there were two out. The Amesville rooters begged loudly for a hit.

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"Just touch it, Tom, just touch it!" shouted Tommy from back of first. "He's easy, old man!"

Being a pitcher and, to the Petersburg battery, an unknown quantity as yet—he had been easily struck out on his previous appearance at the plate—Tom was not viewed seriously by the enemy. A wide one went as a ball without an offer from Tom. Then what was meant to be an out-drop went wrong and the pitcher paused to pull himself together. A good one, straight over the plate, was missed by the swinging bat. Then, with a change of pace, Petersburg's slab artist offered a slow ball. But he didn't fool Tom with it. Tom hit at it a trifle too soon, but he got it, and the ball flew straight and hard down the first-base-line, over the baseman's head, and into right field. It was a clean one-bagger and it scored Kenny and Craig and left Tom on first.

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Buster went to bat, and Tom got the signal to steal on the third pitch. He made it by a clever slide. Buster was two strikes to the bad now. The pitcher made it two and two and then curved a slow ball inside. But Buster connected with it and the sphere flew across the diamond. Tom lighted out for third at the crack of the bat and ran his hardest, but Buster was easily out at first and the inning was over.

Now base-running to a pitcher already tired is no great aid and Tom went into the box a minute

later feeling rather the worse for wear. The first batsman obligingly sent up a short fly which Captain Warner got by a run back into the outfield, but the next man was a canny batsman and before Tom knew it the score was two balls and no strikes. An out-shoot, Tom's best ball, barely cut the corner for a strike. Sam Craig signalled for a low one and a third ball resulted. There was nothing to do then but try the groove, and this Tom did. But there was little speed in what was meant for a fast ball and the batsman cracked out a long two-bagger into left field. Then Tom's troubles began in earnest.

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His curves refused to break for him where they should, his drop bit the plate, and his fast ball no longer had any "ginger." And he was conscious that his arm was hot and tired and that his head was aching. With two strikes on the next batsman, a straight ball was offered and was slammed into right field for a base, bringing in Petersburg's first tally. Having tasted blood, the enemy became unmanageable. Before he knew it, almost, the bases were filled and there was but one out! Then, Sam Craig doing his best to settle him down, Tom finally struck out the Petersburg catcher. Hearty cheers rewarded this performance and it seemed that Tom had found himself again. But four balls was the best he could do against the opposing pitcher and another run was forced across.

Tom was doing his best to follow Sam's signals, but his command over the ball was weak. Once he tried a "knuckle-ball," in the hope of disposing of a batsman who had two strikes and three balls on him. But the "knuckle" started all wrong and swooped down before it crossed the plate, and Tom had given another pass and forced over the third run. By this time Coach Talbot was watching anxiously and Toby Williams was warming up. Captain Warner strode in from his position at second, scolding angrily.

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"For the love of Mike, Pollock, let 'em hit it if you have to, but don't pass 'em! What's the matter with you, anyway? I thought you could pitch! Gee, you're a lemon and no mistake! Now settle down and do something. Get us out of this."

Tom wanted very much to reply, "Get me out of this!" but he didn't. He still hoped that he could pull himself together again. If he could get through this inning with no further damage, he told himself, he could rest awhile and come back feeling better. But he was doomed to disappointment. The succeeding hitter settled Tom's hopes then and there. Leaning against the first ball pitched, he cracked it far out into left field, cleared the bases, and put himself on third!

Petersburg went delirious. Tom, dazed, watched Sam Craig, ball in hand, hurry toward him and heard Frank Warner's shrill and angry voice behind him. What Sam said he didn't know. Warner was facing him scowlingly.

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"That'll do for you, Pollock," he said disgustedly. "You to the bench."

Tom turned with hanging head and walked across the diamond. It seemed a long way to where the three or four substitutes were sitting and he was horribly conscious of the gaze of hundreds of eyes. When Toby Williams, hurrying by him, said, "Hard luck, Tom!" he made no answer. A half-hearted ripple of applause was given him as he went off, a ripple which quickly broadened to a wave as Toby Williams took the ball from Sam Craig. Coach Talbot held out Tom's coat to him.

"Not your day, Pollock," he said kindly. "Too bad."

Tom smiled with an effort as he sank into his seat. Johnson offered him a dipperful of water, and Tom accepted it and pretended to drink. But, although his mouth was parched, he was not thirsty. At the end of the bench Pete Farrar observed him with ill-concealed satisfaction. Steve Arbuckle, the manager, brought his score-book from farther along the bench and seated himself beside Tom.

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"That was a tough inning, Tom," he said cheerfully. "Don't you mind, though. We'll get them yet, old man. You don't look very fit to-day. Heat troubling you?"

"No, I don't think so," murmured Tom. "I don't know what. I—I feel sort of done up. What's the score, Steve?"

"Seven to six," was the answer. But it was no sooner made than Steve was forced to change it. An infield hit had been fielded to the plate by Frank Warner to head off the man on third and the ball had rolled out of Sam Craig's hands. The tying run was in and the runner was safe on first. It was what Steve growlingly called a "bone-head play," for had Frank thrown to first he could easily have caught the batsman. That miscue worried Toby so that he passed the next man and allowed a hit to the succeeding one and the bases were filled once more. But a foul to Buster ended the inning a minute or two later with the score 7 to 7.

And so the game went for two more innings, Toby Williams pitching very good ball, all things considered, and holding the enemy scoreless. On the other hand, the Petersburg pitcher was steady as a rock and Amesville failed to get a runner past second. In the eighth inning, however, Toby had a bad ten minutes and Petersburg drew ahead by one tally, a lead that was soon cut down in the first of the ninth when Sam Craig started things going with a safe bunt that put him on first, from which station he was advanced by Toby Williams's sacrifice. Then Buster singled, Meyers drew a pass, and, with bases full, Captain Warner lined out a two-bagger into right and scored two runs. Before the inning was over two more had been added and Amesville breathed easier.

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Tom watched from the bench, listening to Steve Arbuckle's muttered comments as he worked a busy pencil over the score-sheet, and hoping devoutly that Amesville would win. If she didn't, the fellows would, he knew, blame the defeat on him. And they would be right in doing so. With a three-run lead when she took the field for the final half-inning, Amesville seemed sure of the

victory. But a bad ten minutes followed. Petersburg sprang to the assault viciously and hammered Toby Williams until, when there was a runner on third and one on first and only one out to the visitors' credit, Pete Farrar was hustled to the rescue.

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Pete met scarcely a better fate than Toby. Petersburg scored a run and filled the bases. Then a clout to Sidney in right field, which he caught after a desperate chase half-way to the infield, scored another runner and made the second out. There were still men on third and second and Petersburg's captain was up. But Fate was kind to Amesville and a liner into Smithie's glove ended the combat. Amesville had won, 10 to 9, and the series stood one game each. All depended on the third contest, a week away.

Tom, glad of the outcome but discouraged and disheartened, rode tiredly back to Amesville with an aching arm and a splitting head. He had, he told himself bitterly, pitched his last game of baseball!

CHAPTER XXII

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UNCLE ISRAEL SITS UP

It was nearly six o'clock when the team and its still enthusiastic supporters reached Amesville, and Tom, declining Sidney's invitation to dinner, went on downtown and alighted at a corner near the hardware store. His train to Derry would not leave until a few minutes before eight and he had two hours to get rid of. He might have returned to the boarding-house, but he was in no mood to meet the tableful of people and have to recite the fortunes of the day. He would, he decided, go into a lunch room later and get a bite to eat. He wasn't hungry, anyway. His head still felt heavy, although the splitting ache had gone. As he passed the store he glanced in. It was Saturday and so it would not close until nine o'clock. The front of the store was empty, but Joe Gillig was busy with a customer farther on. Tom turned back and went in. As well stay there as anywhere for an hour or so. He hoped, though, that Mr. Cummings had left.

Joe nodded to him as he entered, and Tom passed around to the back of his counter amongst the sporting goods department were handed over his attention, for all letters or orders concerning the sporting-goods department were handed over to Tom, who, with the occasional assistance of Miss Miller's typewriter, managed replies to such as required them. To-night the mail contained several orders, one from a small baseball club which wanted nine uniforms, three bats and a catcher's mask, and several circulars and catalogues. Tom pinned together the letter from the baseball club and the accompanying measurements and laid it aside for attention on Monday. Then he glanced idly through a summer catalogue of a dealer in athletic goods and, while he was still turning its pages, the lone customer went out and Joe Gillig sauntered down the aisle. Joe had grown considerably older since the day when he had shown Tom around the store, less because of the lapse of time than of a sense of responsibility, for Joe was engaged to be married and the happy event was due to take place in the autumn. Joe's red moustache was now wonderfully luxuriant, and Tom, who liked to twit Joe about it, pretended to believe that the latter touched it up with the red ink every day.

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"How did the game come out, Tom?" asked Joe, seating himself on the edge of the counter.

"We won, ten to nine."

"Fine! Anyone would think to look at you, though, that you'd been whipped to a froth. What's the matter?"

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"Nothing. I'm tired. I missed the special car and the next one was late and I had to walk about a mile. And then——"

"Joe, did I leave my umbrella in the office? Just have a look, will you?" And Mr. Cummings who had hurried in, glanced suspiciously at the clouds piling up behind the steeple of the church farther down the street. Then his eyes fell on Tom, and, "Hello!" he said. "I didn't know you were here, Tom. I just heard about the game." Mr. Cummings paused and eyed Tom doubtfully. "Glad we won," he added.

"Yes, sir."

"Must have been a fine game. Wish I might have seen it. Hm!"

Joe came back with the umbrella, and Mr. Cummings walked to the window and looked out.

"Guess we'll have some rain," he said. "Must have been pretty hot over at Petersburg."

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"Yes, sir, it was hot, real hot."

Mr. Cummings walked to the door, paused irresolutely, and turned back again. "I dare say you've had your supper, Tom," he observed.

"No, sir, not yet. I'm not very hungry."

"Oh, well, you have to eat, you know. I'm eating downtown to-night; wife's away. Better come along with me and we'll have something together."

"Thanks, but I ain't—I'm not hungry, sir, and——"

"Well, come and watch me then," replied the other gaily. "Besides, I want to hear about the game. I'll be back about seven-thirty, Joe. Did Mr. Wright say whether he was coming back to-night?"

"No, sir, he didn't say. He left his light coat in the office, though."

"That doesn't mean anything," Mr. Cummings laughed. "He probably doesn't know where it is and is looking all over town for it! Come on, Tom."

So Tom, wanting to refuse but not liking to, put his cap on and joined the senior partner. "I'm in baseball togs, sir," he said. "I guess it'll look sort of funny, won't it?" [297]

"What of it? You ought to be proud to be seen in that uniform, Tom. Mustn't forget you're a hero, you know."

Tom smiled crookedly. "I guess you haven't heard much about the game, Mr. Cummings."

"Oh, yes, I have; a little, anyway. I ran across Mr. Talbot at the barber's."

"Then you know I'm not much of a hero, sir."

"Eh?" asked Mr. Cummings with elaborate carelessness. "Oh, you mean because you had an off-day in the box? Pshaw! that happens to all of them, Tom. The best pitchers in the Big Leagues get theirs just about so often." They turned into a restaurant and found seats at a small table. It was a much more fashionable place than Tom was accustomed to and he felt rather ill at ease until he had seated himself and so hidden most of his attire behind the tablecloth. "Yes," continued his companion, taking up a menu, "I've seen more than one top-notch get slammed around the lot for keeps, Tom. What do you say to a chop and some shoe-string potatoes and a salad? Sort of hot to eat much, isn't it?" [298]

Tom murmuringly assented, and Mr. Cummings gave the order.

"You had an off-day, Tom, that's all. Next time you'll go in and hold 'em tight. You see if I'm not right."

"There won't be any next time, Mr. Cummings. I've quit."

"Quit!"

"Yes, sir. I almost lost that game to-day for them, sir. I guess I ain't cut out for a pitcher, after all."

"Pshaw! That's foolishness! You can't expect to be in top form every day, son! No one can! Don't let me hear any more talk from you about quitting!" And Mr. Cummings, tossing aside the menu, looked quite fierce. Tom smiled feebly.

"I guess they won't want me, anyway," he muttered. "I—I was perfectly punk!"

"What of it? There's another game coming, isn't there? What was the trouble to-day, Tom?"

Then Tom told about Uncle Israel's illness and how anxious they had all been; how he had decided to accompany the team at almost the last minute and had rushed to the train and, finally, had had to foot it for a mile when he got to Petersburg. [299]

"Well, Great Scott!" exclaimed Mr. Cummings. "I should think you might have an off-day after that! Why, walking a mile in the hot sun is enough to put any pitcher off his game! What the dickens did you do it for?"

"There wasn't any other way to get there."

"Then you should have told Mr. Talbot about it and he would have let you off or had you rest up for three or four innings, anyway. It was a piece of foolishness, Tom, and you deserved to get knocked out of the box."

"Yes, sir. And I was."

The supper arrived then and for a moment or two Mr. Cummings was too busy to continue his remarks. Tom, to his surprise, found himself in possession of a very healthy appetite and fell to with vigour. Mr. Cummings added two glasses of iced coffee to his order and when he had sampled one of them he sighed contentedly and looked across the table again.

"After you get that chop out of the way, Tom, you'll feel better, I guess. What did you have to eat at noon?" [300]

"A couple of sandwiches and a piece of pie, sir."

"Sandwiches and pie! What do you know about that!" Mr. Cummings raised a horrified gaze to the ceiling. "What kind of fodder is that, Tom, to go to work on? What you need is a nurse!"

Tom smiled. Life was beginning to brighten. The chop was excellent, the potatoes hot and crisp, and the iced coffee reached the right spot. After all, he reflected, perhaps he had been premature in resolving to sever his connection with baseball! And he was quite convinced of it when Mr. Cummings had got through lecturing him and it was time to hustle to the station for his train to Derry. They parted on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, Mr. Cummings sending Tom away with a heartening slap on the back and the admonition to cheer up and get his nerve back.

Tom found Uncle Israel's condition still further improved when he reached home. "He et a good supper," announced Aunt Patty in triumph. "Milk toast and the white of two eggs he had. And he's been asleep ever since half-past seven." She listened and nodded satisfiedly. "And don't you make no noise as you go up, Tom," she added. [301]

The next day Uncle Israel was well enough to be seen, and Tom tiptoed into the room in the afternoon. Uncle Israel, propped up against the pillows, his big gnarled hands spread out on the checked comforter, looked pale and grim. But a slight smile fluttered over his face as Tom came forward anxiously.

"Well, you didn't get rid o' me this time," said Uncle Israel rather weakly. "Guess I'm tougher than you thought, eh?"

Tom flushed. "I guess nobody wanted to get rid of you, sir," he replied awkwardly. Uncle Israel grunted.

"Ain't in no hurry to get the farm then?"

"No, sir, I'm not. Besides, I didn't know—I mean——"

"You mean you wasn't certain you'd get it, eh? Well, you will when I get through with it. And there's a tidy bit goes with it, too. If I didn't leave it to you, who would I leave it to?" Uncle Israel glared quite ferociously.

"I hope you won't leave it to anyone, sir, for a long time yet. Are you feeling much better?" [302]

"Humph! I guess I'll pull through. Will if that woman don't starve me to death. What you been doing, Tom?"

"I played baseball for the high school yesterday, sir. I pitched for them."

Uncle Israel nodded. "That's play. What you been doing in the way of work? Cummings and Wright still satisfied with you?"

"I think so. You remember I told you they'd promised me a raise of wages in September."

"Must have money to waste," Uncle Israel grumbled. But his eyes held a kindly gleam in spite of his ungracious tone and Tom suspected that Uncle Israel was secretly a bit proud of his success. "I s'pose your school's about over, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir, it closes Wednesday."

"Learned anything, have you?"

"Lots, sir."

"Humph! I guess, if the truth was told, you've been too much taken up with those games o' baseball to learn much. Sold that pump yet?"

"No, sir, not yet. I guess I won't be able to right away." [303]

"How much you askin' for it?"

"Thirty dollars."

"Thirty dollars! Want to get rich in a hurry, don't you?"

"That isn't too much for it, sir. It's in perfect condition. It worked like a breeze when the contractors had it."

"Humph! Wouldn't take twenty for it, eh?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't want to."

"Nor twenty-five?"

"N-no, I don't think so. Maybe I might, though, if anyone wanted it and would haul it away at that price."

"I'll take it," said Uncle Israel.

CHAPTER XXIII

"PLAY BALL!"

Tom stared, open-mouthed. "You—you'll take it, sir?"

Uncle Israel nodded. "If it don't work like you say it will, though, I won't pay a cent for it. We ain't had a decent breath o' wind for a month and we've been haulin' all the water for the barn by hand. Windmills ain't worth ten cents without wind and that one out there ain't done a mite o' work for a month, not to speak of."

"But—but if you want it, sir, you may have it," said Tom eagerly. "You're perfectly welcome to it, Uncle."

"Maybe I am, but I'll pay for it. You start it out here when you get back. But if it don't pump water for me, back it goes, Tom. Now you tell that female downstairs that, if she don't fetch me up something to eat inside of five minutes, I'll get up and forage for myself!"

When, on Monday morning, Tom informed him that Uncle Israel had bought the pump back, Mr. Cummings laughed until the tears came. "Tom," he said finally, "you'll be the death of me! Think of palming that thing off on your uncle again!" [305]

"But it's perfectly all right, sir," insisted Tom.

"Sure it's all right, son. I'm not saying it isn't. But the idea of selling it back to Israel Bowles gets me!"

Tom couldn't see as much humour in it as Mr. Cummings, but he smiled and hurried out to arrange for having the pump hauled out to the farm. When he returned to the store, Mr. Cummings was telling the junior partner about it, and Mr. Wright was cackling as if it was the best joke in the world.

That was a busy week for Tom. School closed on Wednesday, but before that there was a big dance in the school hall given by the graduating class. Tom went, dressed in his best suit of black serge, which was rather shiny by daylight but looked almost new at night, and had a rather enjoyable time. He didn't dance, for he didn't know how and would have been too shy if he had, but there were lots of other boys who didn't dance either, and they had a merry time looking on with superior manners and passing jokes about the others. Besides that, there were wonderful refreshments and the non-dancers soon discovered that they possessed a distinct advantage in being able to visit the tables as often as they wished! Sidney, with a blue-and-gold badge pinned to the lapel of his evening coat, was in fine feather and quite in his element. Tom didn't see very much of him, for Sidney was an indefatigable dancer and was, besides, on the committee. [306]

The next day the graduation exercises took place in the forenoon and at three o'clock the High School team met the Amesville Electric Company nine. The Electrics were a good deal older than their opponents, but in spite of that High School had no difficulty in beating them, 14 to 6. Tom found himself again that afternoon. Each of the three pitchers was put in for three innings, Pete Farrar starting the game, Tom following him, and Toby Williams finishing out. Tom's slants worked to perfection and in the three innings that he pitched only two men reached first base. All the runs made by the Electrics were scored during Pete's period on the mound. Toby, if he allowed the enemy to press him hard once or twice, emerged with a clean slate.

On Thursday there was a big picnic at a neighbouring grove, but Tom, a bit conscience-stricken at having been away from the store so much, did not attend. Final baseball practice was held Friday forenoon and the boys had a severe siege of it. The pitchers worked for nearly an hour under Mr. George's direction before they were released to take part in fielding practice. Mr. George, on Monday, had heard Tom's account of his Saturday's fiasco in the box and had reiterated what Mr. Cummings had said. [307]

"You shouldn't have tried to pitch, Tom," he said. "You should have told Bat that you weren't fit for it and he'd have let you off."

"I know, sir, but after going to all that trouble to get there in time for the game——"

"That hadn't anything to do with it. Your part is to help win games, Tom, and if you can do it better by staying out you ought to stay out. Get that? There's no sense in a man's pitching if he isn't in shape, because it's a cinch that the other fellows are going to land on him and run away with the game. Take my advice, son, and after this when you're not up to the mark you say so. You know better than the manager—I mean the coach—how you're feeling. It's the team first, every time, son." [308]

Tom wondered a hundred times that week whether he was to be given a chance to redeem himself. Wondered, too, whether, if he was allowed to pitch on Saturday, he would be able to do any better than before. But he felt pretty confident after the game with the Electrics that he would. He realised that his inability to pitch good ball last Saturday was due to physical weariness; and mental weariness, too, perhaps; and not to any loss of cunning in that right arm of his.

Saturday dawned breathlessly still and very hot, too hot to eat any breakfast, Tom decided. But Mr. George, who came to the table while Tom was still trifling with a piece of toast and a glass of milk, decided otherwise and made the boy eat two soft-boiled eggs. At the store Mr. Cummings fussed about him all the morning, taking work out of his hands and forever bidding him take things easy and not get tired. If Mr. Cummings could have had his way, Tom would have remained seated in an arm-chair in the office all the forenoon! The game was to begin at three-thirty instead of two-thirty in order to avoid as much of the heat as possible. At luncheon Tom was much too restless and excited, too anxious, in fact, to eat without persuasion. Mr. George supplied the persuasion. After luncheon, seeing that his protégé was "up in the air," to use his own expression, the detective took him into the side-yard and let him pitch three or four dozen balls leisurely in order to take his mind off the coming contest. Finally, when Mr. George had called a halt, and they were back in the shade of the porch, Tom asked the question that he had been eager to ask for days. [309]

"I wonder——" he began. Then he stopped. At last he started again: "Do you suppose, Mr. George, they're going to let me pitch to-day?"

"Sure to. I don't know whether Bat will start you or Toby Williams, but it's going to take more than one pitcher to get through a game on a day like this. So you're certain to get your chance. When you do, Tom, just remember that you aren't expected to perform any miracles. Lots of young pitchers get the idea fixed in their heads that the whole game depends on them. They get so anxious and keyed up that they don't do themselves justice. Just remember that you've got eight other fellows with you, Tom, and let them do their share. When you get where it's a case of put one across or give a base, why, slam it over and let someone else worry. And whatever you do, son, work slow. Take all the time you want—and then some! Don't let anyone hurry you. It's [310]

better for you and it's harder on the batsman. Lots of men can't stand a pitcher who's deliberate. They want to hit and hit right away, and the more the pitcher keeps 'em waiting the more anxious they get. And there's no one easier to handle than an over-anxious batter. He will reach out after wide ones and step back for inside ones and it's dollars to doughnuts you've got his number right at the start. Just remember that, Tom. Time doesn't cost you a cent. Help yourself to it!"

Then, later, on the way out to the grounds on the car, they went over once more the peculiarities of the players of the Petersburg team. Mr. George had them all catalogued as to their batting. This one was death on low ones outside and mustn't have that sort. This one was a good bunter and must not be fed high ones. This one, with runners on second or third and the game at a critical place, should be passed, since he was a hard clouter. And so on, Tom listening and memorising.

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"Of course, this is up to Craig," said Mr. George, "but he may forget or mix his signals and so there's no harm in your knowing what you're up against. Here we are. Pile out!"

That final game drew the biggest crowd of the season, although the stands were but half-filled when the team assembled for warming-up work. By the time the game was called, however, the seats were all occupied and there was a good sprinkling of spectators along the base-lines. About everyone we know was there. Mr. Cummings, of course, rather excited and waving a palm-leaf fan in a corner of the players' bench; Mr. and Mrs. Morris in a front row of the stand near third base; (Tom went over and chatted with them a minute just before the teams took their positions;) Mr. Tully, whom Tom had presented with a ticket, his coat in his lap and his pipe sending a cloud of smoke straight up in the still air; and several others from the boarding-house, who had in some way or other managed to get the afternoon off.

The umpire was the physical director from the Young Men's Christian Association, who caused some amusement by appearing with the upper part of his body attired in a striped blazer of black and yellow, which he kept carefully buttoned all during the game, thus giving the impression that there was nothing underneath!

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Each team warmed up three pitchers, not a very difficult feat on such a day. Of the local twirlers, Tom and Toby looked in the pink of condition, but Pete Farrar had a fagged look about him. At a few minutes before the half-hour the diamond emptied and the players retired to the benches. Then the umpire walked to the plate, swept it with a broom, and looked toward the Amesville bench.

"All right, High School," announced Mr. Talbot. "On the run, now! Pollock, you'll start the game. Take it easy; we've got nine innings to go and this is some hot!"

The fielders trotted across the sun-smitten turf to their places, Sam Craig donned his mask, Tom walked to the mound, the first of the Petersburg batsmen stepped to the plate, and the umpire called, "Play ball!"

CHAPTER XXIV

PITCHER POLLOCK

[313]

It was hot! Tom's head felt as though it was being slowly baked in spite of his cap as, getting the signal from Sam, he swung his arms up and sped a fast ball across in the groove. Behind him the cheerful voices of his team-mates made a spattering chorus.

"Here we go Tom! You've got his number, old man!"

"No one walks, Tom!"

"That's pitching 'em, Tom, old boy! That's pitching 'em!"

"No one sees first this inning, fellows! On your toes now!"

The head of the Petersburg batting-list retired to the bench, flicking his bat disgustedly toward the pile. Just four balls had settled him. The next youth up was a clever bunter and the infield shortened a little. Tom sped them in low; one strike; one ball; two strikes; two balls—

Then the batsman was streaking for first and Bert Meyers, coming on the dead run, was scooping up the trickling ball. A quick underhand throw, a stab into the air of Buster's "meat hand," and two men were out. Petersburg put the next batsman on first, but went into the field a minute or two later when Tom made his second strike-out. Amesville cheered then and kept on cheering until Buster had tapped the plate with his bat and stood awaiting his fate. But neither Buster nor Bert Meyers, who followed, was able to solve the opposing pitcher. Frank Warner reached his base on a scratch hit that was too hard for second baseman to handle, but was out a minute later on an attempted steal.

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Again Amesville took the field and again Tom, working with machine-like precision, mowed the enemy down in one, two, three order. For Amesville, Tommy Hughes struck out, Sidney reached first on a wild throw by second baseman, Smithie fanned, and Kenny went out to centre fielder. Calvert, the Petersburg slab artist, was in fine form to-day. When all is said, there's nothing like a roasting hot day to show a pitcher at his best, and it was very evident that the redoubtable Calvert, a small, wiry youth with a shock of hair the colour of butcher's paper, liked the

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conditions. In spite of the fact that up to the end of the third inning no one got beyond first base, the contest proved breathlessly exciting to both the supporters of the home team and to the good-sized contingent that had travelled over from the neighbouring town. It was a pitchers' battle, with the honours about even, but one never knows in baseball when a break will come. A lucky hit, an error at a critical moment, a close decision by an umpire—any of these things are often sufficient to start a rally and, in a few short minutes, change the entire complexion of the game. When Petersburg came to bat in the first of the fourth there was tension evidenced amongst players and spectators both. Petersburg had three of her best batters coming up.

If Tom felt the tension he didn't show it. Mr. George, seated on the bench beside Coach Talbot, voiced admiration in low tones. "I never saw a youngster who had the form that kid's got," he said to the coach as Tom, settling his visor over his eyes, leaned forward to get the signal from the catcher. "He's a born pitcher, Bat; you can't get around it!" [316]

"Yes," Mr. Talbot nodded. "In about three years from now he will be a wonder. Ever hear him say whether he was going to college?"

"I've heard him say he wanted to," replied the detective, "but he doesn't think he will be able to. There isn't much money, I guess."

"He's got to go, Ben. I'm going to talk to him about it. I'd like to steer him to my college, if I could."

"He could play professional ball in two or three years if he wanted to," mused Mr. George. "I could get him a try-out any day, and it wouldn't be long before he'd be grabbed up by one of the Big League teams."

"Time enough for that when he's been through college, Ben. Besides, and meaning no offence, the boy's too smart to waste himself playing baseball for a living."

"I don't know, Bat. Baseball isn't what it used to be, and ball players aren't like what they were once. Not that I'm knocking the old-timers, either. I come pretty near being one myself. But there's a pretty fine, self-respecting lot of men playing professional ball these days. Why, say, it's just as respectable a profession as—as medicine or law, isn't it?" [317]

"Maybe. I didn't mean that. The trouble is a ball player uses up the best years of his life getting nowhere, Ben."

"I don't know about that, either. As I said before, it isn't like it used to be. Ball players are pretty smart nowadays, and by the time they're getting by they've worked up a nice little business on the side or saved up a tidy bunch of money."

"If they're the saving kind," answered the coach with a smile. "You know yourself, Ben, you wouldn't deliberately advise Pollock to become a professional ball player. Now would you?"

"N-no, I guess I wouldn't. Still, if there wasn't anything better——"

"There is, though, for that chap. I don't know what it is, but he's got a good head on his shoulders and he's naturally smart and not afraid of work. If he was my boy, I'd put him into college, give him a couple of years to look around and decide on a profession or an occupation, and then see that he buckled down and worked hard. What's his father like?" [318]

"Dead. He lives with an uncle out at Derry. The uncle's a farmer and a bit tight-fisted, they tell me. Maybe Tom will get the property when the old man dies. I don't know."

"Well, he's got two more years at high school. By that time—I'll have a talk with him some day. I haven't much money myself, Ben, but I'd scrimp a bit to see a kid like that make good and not go to waste."

"Why, say; so'd I, Bat. I'm fond of that boy, too. You've no idea how plucky he is. Why, when I ran across him at the boarding-house, Bat, he'd been teaching himself to pitch with one of these ten-cent books! And he was doing it, too! Look here, let's you and me sort of keep an eye on him, Bat. I haven't a pile of money, either, but I'd spend a little to help Tom through college, if that was what you were thinking of."

Coach Talbot nodded. "Something of the sort. Of course, if he showed up strong in a couple of years, he could get into a college and not have to pay anything. Take my own college, for instance. There's a lot of old grads who are always on the lookout for promising athletes. Any fellow who looks real good to them can get through four years without its costing him a cent. It's done right along. But, somehow, I don't like it. It may do for some fellows, Bat, but it's—it's——" [319]

"I wouldn't let a boy of mine do it—if I had one," declared Mr. George with emphasis. "Maybe in a couple of years, Bat, you and I will be flusher. Then Tom's got a pretty good position with Cummings and Wright. Cummings is real fond of him; you can see that. In two years he might be able to save quite a little himself. Then, maybe, you and I, we could——"

Mr. Talbot nodded again. Then he laughed softly. "We're a funny pair to be adopting a boy, Ben!"

"I wasn't meaning to exactly adopt him——"

"I understand. We'll think it over. Anyhow, at least we can keep an eye on the chap and see that he doesn't—— Hello! here's trouble!"

Tom had fanned the first batsman, but the second, after waiting craftily, had drawn a pass. The Petersburg coaches shouted joyfully:

"Here's where we break it up, fellows! Here we go! Make it be good, Gus, make it be good!"

But Tom steadied down again and the best the next batter could do was to hit to shortstop and the first runner was out at second, the double failing by a scant foot. The next man up caught an out-shoot on the end of his bat and whaled it into deep centre, placing the runner on third and wisely staying at first himself. By this time the Petersburg supporters were rooting lustily and the coaches were shouting their lungs out at first and third. The latter realised that if they could unsteady the rival pitcher for a moment now they could leap into the lead. The man on first stole on the first ball, a pitchout, and Sam Craig slammed the ball back to Tom. The runner on third, however, was too canny to try for the plate, although he had taken a good lead. [320]

With one ball to his credit, for the batsman had wisely refrained from hitting at the pitchout, knowing that Sam Craig would not be likely to throw down to second with a man on third, he allowed a strike to go by, an in-shoot that broke beautifully and slipped over the inside of the plate. Then came another ball, a drop. And then, while Tom was poised on one foot, his hands overhead, two things happened simultaneously. Mr. Talbot leaped from the bench with an involuntary exclamation of warning and the runner on third, who had been taking a good twelve-foot lead, dashed for the plate! [321]

Sam's shout was not necessary, nor the cries of the fielders, for Tom had already seen what was up. Hurriedly he stepped forward and sped the ball to the catcher, the batsman struck at it and missed, and the runner slid feet forward for the plate. Down swept Sam's arm, but the runner was safe, one foot hooked into the plate and his body well out of reach. And on third the man from second danced and shouted in a cloud of dust!

Petersburg yelled and hooted. Tom, who had followed the delivery to the plate on the run, looked ruefully at Sam. Sam, frowning, walked across and placed the ball in his hand.

"Watch out for that, Tom," he whispered. "They'll try it again if they need a run badly. All right, let's get this one."

And Tom got him, sending two slow balls across shoulder-high, at each of which the batsman struck and each of which he missed.

"Now then, fellows, let's get after them!" called Frank Warner as Amesville went to bat. But Calvert still was master, and, although Meyers hit safely and was advanced to second by the captain's neat sacrifice bunt, Tommy Hughes and Sidney were easy outs, the former hitting straight into third baseman's glove and the latter retiring on strikes. [322]

Tom went through the fifth without misadventure, disposing of the Petersburg tail-enders easily. But after Amesville had been to bat again the score still stood 1 to 0 in Petersburg's favour. Calvert had no strike-outs that inning, but he made two assists, knocking down two liners and fielding them to first in time to put out Smith and Kenny. Sam Craig brought the Amesville rooters to their feet when he smashed the ball far into left field for what might easily have been good for two bases, but which resulted only in a put-out for the fielder who, after a pretty sprint, made a brilliant one-hand catch of the long fly.

"All up for the lucky seventh!" was the slogan of the Petersburg supporters as the teams changed places. And a "lucky seventh" it proved to be, but not for Petersburg. Tom added two strike-outs to his credit and, although the opposing catcher got a two-bagger off him, the side went out without a run. [323]

In the last half Amesville found her chance. Calvert let down for an instant, passed Kenny, and then made the mistake of giving Sam Craig a low ball outside. Sam, who swung a long bat and loved low ones, lighted on it for two bases and sent Joe Kenny to third. Then the Petersburg pitcher recovered, and Tom went out on strikes. Buster hit a slow one to shortstop, who, after making certain that the runner on third was not trying to score, threw hurriedly to first. The ball struck in front of the baseman and bounded away from him, and amidst wild acclaim Amesville scored her first run. Meyers went out, third to first, but Frank Warner again proved his dependability as a batsman by lining out a red-hot one straight through the pitcher's box, bringing in Sam Craig and Buster. Such shouting as followed then! Mr. Cummings climbed up on the bench and waved his palm-leaf fan in one hand and his straw hat in the other and shouted himself purple in the face, while Mr. Talbot and Mr. George, their faces wreathed in smiles, gravely shook hands! The pandemonium kept up for minute after minute, while Captain Warner, dancing around on first, begged Tommy Hughes to "smash it, Tommy, smash it!" But Calvert, a little pale and serious, showed his grit then by settling down and disposing of Tommy with just four pitched balls! [324]

But with a lead of two runs Amesville's chances seemed dazzlingly bright, and so they remained all through the eighth, in which inning, if the Brown-and-Blue could not add to her score, neither could the visitors. And so the ninth inning began with the figures 3 to 1 and everything pointing to a victory for Amesville.

CHAPTER XXV

THREE OUT

Mr. Cummings, who had not failed to inquire anxiously between the innings how Tom felt, and who had on each occasion received the same answer, "Fine, thanks, sir!" found Tom's reply this time less reassuring.

"I'm all right, Mr. Cummings," Tom said. "I'll be glad when it's over, though. It's the first time I've pitched nine innings to real batters, sir."

"Arm getting tired?" asked Mr. Cummings solicitously.

Tom shook his head and smiled. "No, sir, it's my head. I never knew before," he added, "that a pitcher did so much pitching with his head!"

"Well, just you keep it up, son. You've done great work so far. Don't you let 'em get at you this time!"

"I'll try not to," replied Tom quietly, slipping out of his coat.

But the pace had been hard, and Tom was feeling it now. He put himself in a hole with the first batsman when what should have been a straight one went wild, an out-shoot missed the plate by an inch and a drop was judged too low by the umpire. With three balls and no strikes, Tom recalled Mr. George's advice and shook his head when Sam asked for an in-shoot. Instead he sent a ball straight over, fast but with nothing on, and scored a strike. Again Sam wanted a curve, and again Tom shook his head. This time, with a change of pace, he tried a slow ball in the groove, and the batsman struck and missed. [326]

"He can't do it again, Jimmy! Make it be good, old scout!" shouted the coach on first.

Another straight ball in the groove, breast-high this time. The batter found it, there was a sharp *crack*, and the ball was sailing into the outfield over second baseman's head. By the time Tommy Hughes had run in and thrown it to Frank Warner the runner was safe on second base, and Petersburg was howling her triumph. For a minute it seemed that Tom was going to put himself in the hole again, for his first two deliveries were balls. But a "knuckler" fooled the second batsman and a drop that looked awfully good until it was almost at the plate evened the score. Then a low one straight across the rubber, which the batsman swung at terrifically and missed by inches, made the first out. The next man landed on the first ball and drove it between shortstop and third, but Joe Kenny had sneaked in and his throw to the plate, while it let the batsman get to second, held the first runner at third, and brought a salvo of applause from the home-team's supporters. [327]

Tom was bothered now by the memory of that steal to the plate and was afraid to wind up lest the runner on third duplicate the performance of his team-mate. The result was that the batsman, after fouling several times and having two strikes called on him, got his base on balls. There was but one out now and the bases were filled, and Petersburg was cheering and shouting continuously and beating time lustily with feet and hands. Back of first and third the coaches kept up an unceasing cross-fire. On the bench Mr. George leaned forward anxiously.

"If he gives that fellow one on the outside, it's all over," he muttered. Mr. Talbot nodded.

"If we get out of this mess with less than two runs coming across, we'll be lucky," he said. [328]

Sam Craig walked down and conferred a minute with Tom, and the visiting partisans hooted loudly. The infield moved in to cut off runs at the plate. It was Petersburg's chance to win the game.

Tom knew that he must at least keep the next two men from hitting out of the infield. Neither of them were dangerous batters, although that counted for little since at such times it frequently happens that the poorest hitter on a team comes to the mark with a rescuing wallop. The first batsman was plainly anxious to hit, and Sam took his cue from that. The first ball was a drop that failed to please the umpire. Sam was more than ordinarily deliberate in returning the ball to Tom, and Tom was as slow as cold molasses. He looked all over the field before he even faced the batsman again. Then he studied that youth thoughtfully for several seconds before he began to wrap his fingers about the ball. The batter showed his impatience. He stepped from one foot to the other, leaned across the plate, flourished his bat with short strokes. Sam gave the signal, Tom nodded, threw up his hands, and shot the ball like a streak of greased lightning across the inner corner of the platter. [329]

"Strike!" announced the umpire. The batsman turned angrily.

"What!" he cried. Sam tossed back the ball. On third the runner was dancing and shuffling, running along the base-line with Tom's wind-up, and scooting back to the bag as the ball was delivered.

Again the signal and again the ball sped forward. But this time it was a slow one that floated lazily to the plate and then erratically settled down and under the swinging bat.

"Strike two!" said the umpire.

The batsman could not dispute that. He only growled and glared ferociously at Tom. The latter could afford to waste one and so he answered Sam's signal with an in-shoot that was refused and went as a ball. It was two and two now. The stands were almost silent as Tom wound up for his next delivery. Very deliberately he went at it and when, finally, his hand shot forward it hardly seemed that there could be any "steam" on the ball. And yet I doubt if few persons saw it after it left Tom's hand. Certainly the batsman didn't. One could discern his brief instant of indecision before he swung his bat around with every ounce of strength behind it. He spun on his heel, staggered, and recovered as the umpire cried: [330]

"Striker's out!"

Amesville burst into joyful acclaim and on the bench Mr. George, with a pleased smile and a satisfied sigh, leaned back again.

"Two gone!" cried Frank Warner cheerfully. "Last man, fellows!"

The next batsman, who was Petersburg's left fielder, showed none of the nervous impatience of the previous player. He stood square to the plate, crowded a little, and looked at Tom steadily as he poised his bat. Sam Craig, as he squatted to give his signal, glanced down the base-line toward where the runner on third was pawing the earth a few feet from the bag, ready on the instant to race for the plate. Tom's glance followed Sam's for an instant as he wrapped his fingers about the ball. That runner on third was disquieting. Even, though, Tom comforted himself, if he did steal home the score would still be 3 to 2. It would be best to give all his attention to the batsman and not allow that dancing, shouting figure over there to take his mind from the real task, which was to strike out the man at the plate. [331]

A ball was called and then a strike, Tom risking a "knuckler" with good results. Then there was a brief instant of panic when the next delivery went wild and bounded into the earth at the right of the plate. But Sam dropped in front of it and saved a run then and there. There was a warning note in his voice as he sped the ball back.

"Take your time, Tom! Now, right over with it!"

Tom frowned as the ball slapped back into his glove. He had allowed that fellow on third to take his mind from the ball at the moment of delivery. He must stop that or something would happen. Very resolutely then he strove to close his ears to the "Hi! hi! hi!" of the coacher's voice and his eyes to the figure that leaped back and forth along the base-line there. And he succeeded, for his next ball broke sharply out and down and the bat passed over it with a vicious swish and the umpire announced "Strike two!"

It was two and two now. Sam did not intend that Tom should waste any, for he signalled for a low one outside. And Tom pulled at his visor, hitched up his trousers, glanced idly about the bases, and fingered the ball. Then back went his arms behind his head, up came his foot, and— [332]

"There he goes!" shrieked a dozen voices. A babel of warning shouts burst on the air. Half-way between third and home the runner, head down and legs twinkling, was eating up the space. At the plate Sam Craig with outstretched hands begged for the ball!

Tom was in the middle of his wind-up when the warning reached him and it seemed to him afterward that in one brief atom of time he did more thinking than could ordinarily be crowded into the space of a full minute. His startled glance showed him that if he was to head off the runner he must get the ball to the catcher like a streak. But, he reasoned, if he pitched hurriedly he might pitch wildly, and a passed ball meant not only that run but another one besides, for the man at second was already streaking to third. Even if a run crossed the plate the score would still be 3 to 2 in Amesville's favour. All this passed through Tom's mind in a twinkling, in such a period of time, perhaps, as allowed the flying runner to twice set foot to ground. And not for even so brief a time had Tom paused in his delivery. What indecision there was was of his mind only, for his muscles went through their routine smoothly, his body lunged forward, his arm shot out, and away shot the ball. [333]

But Sam never got that throw, and the runner from third, with a frantic slide, scored undisputed. For Tom, instead of pitching to the plate, had stepped out of the box and hurled the ball to Bert Meyers at third. It went hard and straight, and Bert, although he was not expecting it, was ready for it when it came to him breast-high. The ball slammed into his glove, he stepped one stride along the path, and the runner from second, seeing his danger too late to stop and double back, dived for the bag. [But down came Bert's arm and it was all over!](#)

On to the diamond flooded the triumphant partisans of the Brown-and-Blue. Cheers filled the air. Tom, struggling in vain, was heaved to the shoulders of two joy-maddened youths and held there by others. Surprised and breathless, clutching for support, he looked down over the heads of the laughing, shouting crowd that surged across the field. The other players had been captured, or most of them at least, for Tom saw them here and there above the crowd. Frank Warner, grinning, came swaying by on the shoulders of a pushing trio. [334]

"Bully work, Pollock!" he shouted.

Then Tom's bearers fell in behind and in a moment there was a procession of captured players swaying here and there around the diamond. Tom caught sight of Mr. Cummings, red-faced, shouting unintelligibly; of Mr. George, a wide smile on his face; and of May Warner, standing straight and exultant at the front of the stand and waving a brown-and-blue banner. As Tom passed she caught his eye and waved more wildly than ever. And Tom found himself actually smiling at her!

And then, a little farther on toward the gate, his bearers were crowded close to the edge of the stand and his gaze, passing a trifle shamefacedly over the faces that lined it, fell on the laughing countenance of Mrs. Morris. She clapped her hands as she saw him, and then:

"Tom! Tom!" she called across. "Do be careful of your hair!" [335]

And Tom, laughing and blushing a little, put up an unsteady hand and discovered himself bare-headed. He had lost his cap! Not that it mattered, however. Nothing did matter. Amesville had won!

Transcriber's Notes:

Except for the frontispiece, illustrations have been moved to follow the text that they illustrate, so the page number of the illustration may not match the page number in the Illustrations.

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

The Author's long dash style has been retained.

Page 294: the phrase "the sporting goods department were handed over" was duplicated on the third and fifth lines of the first paragraph. Unfortunately, the first instance *replaced* a missing line of text. The paragraph was retained as printed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PITCHER POLLOCK ***

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