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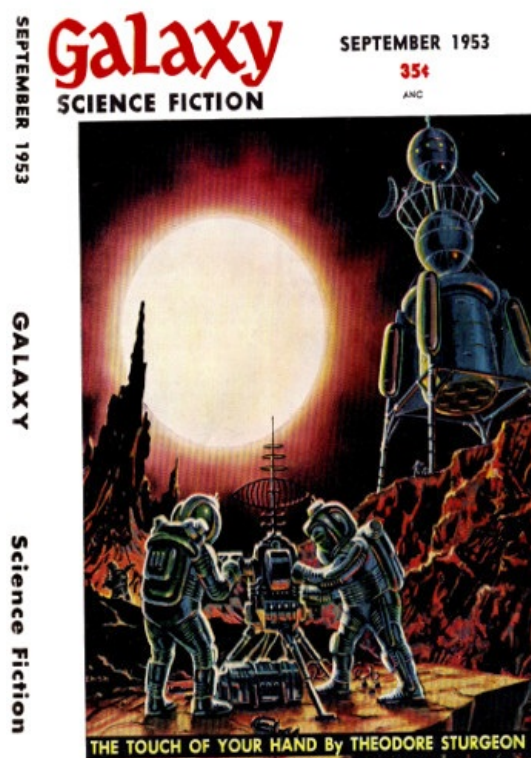
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HALF PAST ALLIGATOR ***



Half Past Alligator

By DONALD COLVIN

Illustrated by BARTH

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***It takes sportsmanship to make a ball team ...
and foul play to get a backward race civilized!***

Bill Bradley shooed away the group of Quxas that had surged over the first-base line. With broad grins on their flat, piebald faces, they moved away—in the wrong direction, of course—and squatted in a smiling semicircle around Pat Reed, who was playing third. This was bad, because Reed was a fifty-fifty player: It was an even chance whether he got the ball or the ball got him. One of the half-domesticated thrags broke loose and cantered across the outfield with its peculiar five-legged gait. In the hubbub, Ray Bush stole second. Nobody seemed to notice.

Sighing heavily, Bill returned to the mound and whiplashed in a fast one, tight across the letters. The hitter got only a small piece of it; a pop fly sauntered toward left field. Judging it to a nicety, Gust Mustas came racing in, evaded a tethered thrag, leaped a hole some Quxa had dug and forgotten, and made a shoestring catch, retiring the side. The Quxas cheered deliriously.

Bill trotted off the mound. For a moment, the thrill of the game held him. This was the way things should be: The feel of smoothly flowing muscles, the thudding sound of horsehide hitting a leather glove, the weight of a bat in your hands in your first ball game after clambering over and scabbling in an unexplored planet for fourteen months.

Then he caught sight of Candace Mathews, walking among the pneuma-huts that served as the outpost camp for the expedition. Gloom enveloped him again, surrounding him like a dank fog.

For fourteen long months, Bill had feasted on the memory of Candy Mathews, on his recollection of her turquoise eyes and cascading brown hair, on the remembrance of her soft lips on his last night under the four moons of Vensor III.

Today she had arrived with the seventy-odd men and women who comprised the appraisal unit, the final group of the planet's explorers. He had looked forward like a schoolboy to her coming. And, like a schoolboy, he had suffered black despair when his dreams were shattered.

For the Candy Mathews who got off the shuttlebug at Camp Outpost was not the Candy Mathews who had said soft words on Vensor III. She was, instead, a self-assured young woman, somehow harder, who felt only an indifferent tolerance toward a tall young man named Bill Bradley, and an all-consuming, hero-worshipping infatuation for a newcomer, a dapper walking brain, Vance Montgomery, one of the council's smart boys, with the title of planet evaluator.

"He's simply wonderful," she had said. And the joy of life had gone out of Bill Bradley.

The appraisal group brought in athletic equipment and Bill's men spontaneously declared a holiday, their first on the planet. Baseball was the order of the afternoon and they shanghai'd a not unwilling Bill to pitch. He should, he knew, be laying out reports for Montgomery to study. He did not particularly want to be with Montgomery.

Bill sat on the xetal log that served as a bench.

One Quxa was bent over, examining first base. He made a colorful sight. The first baseman slapped him jovially on the loin cloth to move him.

The owner of the thrag caught up to it and was struggling manfully to lead it away. The five-legged beast defied his efforts, rearing and dragging him. A dozen Quxas stood nearby. Their sympathies were obviously with their fellow-Quxa, but they made no move to help him.

Reed was on the bench next to Bill. He had come in with the appraisal group.

"Your vivid friends," he said, cocking a thumb at the Quxas, "don't appear too bright."

"They're smart enough," said Bill. "Almost as intelligent as we are. It's just that they've never risen above a herd culture."

"Look," said Reed. "I'm a silviculturist. Give me a hunk of wood and I can tell how long it took to grow, what it's good for, where it can be raised and how much board and profit can be made out of it. But this kind of talk throws me. Try another wave-length."

"Socially, they're like the seals or penguins back on Earth. They like to gather in groups. The things they can do individually, they do well. But they don't know how to help each other. That's beyond them."

"Don't understand the meaning of cooperation?"

"The word isn't even in their language. I've seen forty of them standing around, fretting and stewing, while the horals killed off one of their fellows."

"What are horals?"

"The other dominant life-form here. Nasty brutes, like big upright ants with tentacles. Stand about as high as my chest. Most malignant things I've seen. One Quxa can handle any horal,

maybe even two or three. But the horals hunt in packs. Good-by Quxa."

"Killing them off, are they?"

"This is the last big concentration the Quxas have left. In another hundred years, there'll be no more Quxas."

They looked again at the natives. The Quxas were something to see—human in form, although somewhat shorter than Earthmen; their skins were blotched and dashed with patches of vivid colors. Antiquarians talked of their resemblance to the ancient circus clowns, a likeness furthered by their broad, flat faces and habitual grins.

"Sort of hate to see them disappear," Bill said glumly. "They're happy, good-natured creatures. In their whole race, I know only one who's mean. We've done our best to help them. But if they won't cooperate even in a matter of life and death, what incentive can you offer them?"

An elbow dug into him.

"Up to the platter, dream boy," said Gust Mustas. "A hit means two runs."

Selecting a bat, Bill made his way to the plate. In the middle distance, Vance Montgomery emerged from a hut. Candy went to him eagerly, put a hand on his arm. A deep rage engulfed Bill.

The first pitch was a curve that failed to break. As it came fatly over the plate, Bill swung angrily. The ball rocketed up and away, past the infield, over the head of the desperately running left-fielder and dropped toward a sure home run.

Then a curious thing happened. One of the Quxas darted away from the gabbling group along the foul line, his short legs churning over the uneven ground. As the ball sank, he dove, plucked it out of the air with one broad hand, turned a somersault and came up with it, grinning. It was an impossible catch and the Earthmen joined the Quxas in applause. Still clinging to the ball, the Quxa made little bobbing bows of acknowledgment.



"Throw it in!" shouted Bill. The Quxa stood motionless. "Throw it in, Adlaa!" Bill urged. He went through a throwing motion.

The Quxa nodded comprehension. He went into a violent wind-up. His left foot came up, his upper body went back, his right arm snapped in an arc. The ball flew from his hand, straight and fast.

In the wrong direction, of course.

The pack of Quxas pelted after it, shouting, picked it up and threw again. To his surprise, Bill found himself pounding after them, bawling fruitless pleas, aware that he looked foolish, but, in his rage, not caring. He closed in on them on the fifth throw and his fingertips touched the ball.

He succeeded only in deflecting it. There was a dull *thunk* and the game was over. The ball had struck Vance Montgomery, planet evaluator, squarely in the left eye.

Three things were said then to Bill Bradley.

One was by Montgomery as he handed back the ball. "I was not aware, Bradley, that the job of camp leader entailed joining the rowdiness of the native races."

One was by Candy Mathews, hopping with anger. "You're a barbarian, Bill Bradley. Monty might have been badly hurt."

The third was by a clot of Quxas, crowding eagerly. "Play ball! Billbrad, more play ball!"

To the first two, Bill did not reply. To the Quxas, he said one word, "Nuts!" and dolefully followed Montgomery into the headquarters hut.

In spite of his natural prejudice against Montgomery, Bill was forced into a reluctant admiration for the way the man worked.

Montgomery's task was to recommend whether the planet should be marked for immediate colonization, placed on a reserve list for future expansion, or be left strictly alone as unworthy of occupancy. He tore through Bill's reports like a small child through a bag of jellybeans. His questions, if pompous, were pointed.

Within twenty-four hours, ready to leave for the main camp, he called a conference.

He stood before the group, as dapper as a man can be with a rainbow bruise under one eye, complacently listening to the resonance of his own voice. Beside him, Candy nodded worshipful agreement. Bill grumped in a corner.

For a full forty-five minutes, Montgomery outlined additional data he wanted gathered. His voice was faintly chiding, implying by its tone that anybody but a dolt would have obtained the information long ago.

"And now," he said, "we come to the question of the humanoid denizens of this planet—the so-called Quxas." He fingered his black eye. "Many persons might conclude that the Quxas are not worth saving; and in themselves, they are not. However, my preliminary conclusions—based, unfortunately, on insufficient data—lead me to believe that this planet will be used for colonization in about five hundred years. It would be very convenient then to have a dominant life-form friendly to the galactic humans and capable of being integrated with the colonists. Some method of preserving the Quxas must therefore be worked out. In this, the advance group has failed lamentably."

He paused, glanced around triumphantly.

"How do I propose to achieve this? By a historical method. What do nations do when they are in peril? They call upon a single man, place themselves under him and let him lead them out. When the ancient western civilization was in its greatest danger after the fall of Rome, the people gathered around the strong men, made them kings and dukes and earls, and were saved from barbarism.

"I shall do the same for the Quxas. The Quxas shall have a king."

His eyes sought out Bill.

"My acquaintance here has been short. I must rely on advice. Bradley, whom would you recommend as king of the Quxas?"

"Well," said Bill slowly, "Moahlo is the most intelligent. He's good-natured and kindly. He has a lot of artistic ability. Some of his carvings are being taken back for the Galactic Folk Museum."

"An artist!" said Montgomery in disgust. "Well, let's have a look at him."

Moahlo was finishing a figurine near one of the meandering paths that the Quxas had worn by habit, not design. A bemused group of natives looked on admiringly.

Down the path came Ratakka, the biggest of the Quxas, his shoulders proudly back, his face set in the truculent scowl. Bill knew and disliked him, and apprehensively felt sure the peaceful scene would be destroyed. Alone of an amiable, tolerant race, Ratakka was perpetually ill-tempered, the rankling product of Lord knew what alien genetic accident or trauma.

Ratakka found his path obstructed by the carving. Callously, he brought his foot down on the delicate figurine, crushing it to splinters. Moahlo sprang up in gentle protest. Ratakka gave him the back of a meaty hand that knocked him off his feet. Two spectators indicated disapproval. Ratakka smashed their heads together and strode on.

"To save a culture, Bradley," said Montgomery, who had watched the brutal display with admiration, "you need strength, not delicacy or feeling. That man shall be king of the Quxas."

He ran after Ratakka.

The members of the outpost staff looked at Bill in dismay. He shrugged sadly and walked out of

the headquarters hut. At the doorway, Adlaa was waiting for him with the same old plea.

"Play ball?" he begged. "More play ball, Billbrad?"

In his despondent mood, Bill did not care.

"All right. I'll throw the ball to you and you throw it back to me."

"Quxas not do that."

"It's just as much fun to throw the ball in one direction as in any other direction," Bill explained patiently. "Unless you throw it back, forget it—no play ball."

Adlaa thought seriously. "Hunky dokey. Want play ball."

They were tossing it back and forth in the middle of a cheering group when a half-track passed, taking Montgomery, Candy and Ratakka to the main camp. The look that the girl gave Bill was disdainful.

"There's a gaggle of natives outside in assorted shades," said Pat Reed the next day. "They want to play ball. Moahlo's at their head. He carved a bat."

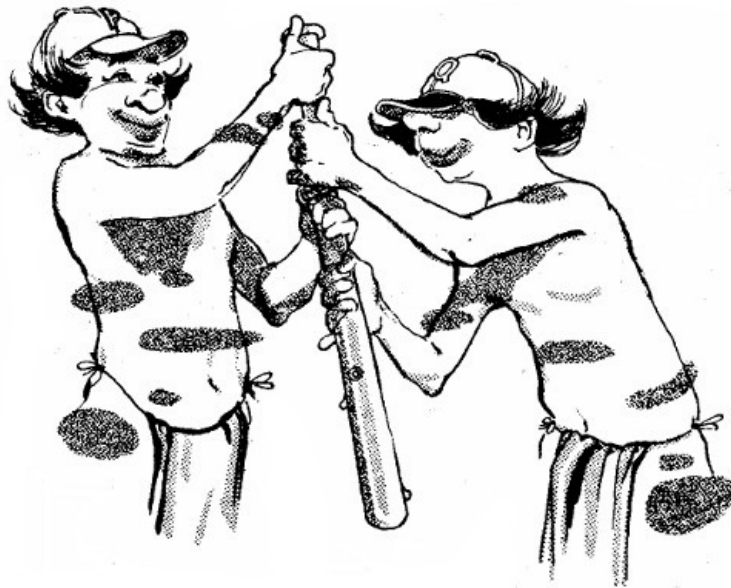
"Tell them to beat it. We're busy."

"Let's give them some fun while we can. They won't enjoy life much after King Rat gets back here."

"That's the truth," Bill agreed. "All right."

"I wish your painted idiots would get over their baseball mania," complained Rudy Peters, the mineralogist, two days later. "Look me over carefully, will you, Bill? I think my throwing arm just dropped off."

"They're nutty about it, all right," Bill Bradley said. "Too bad it couldn't have been about something with some economic value."



"Economic value, the man wants. Okay, I'll talk economic value to you. Bet you fifty units I can make a better ball team out of these freaks than you can."

"Well, make it thirty."

"You're on, sucker. I've lined up the sweetest shortstop that ever spit in a glove ..."

"Here's your thirty," said Rudy Peters a week after. "How was I to know that shortstop wouldn't throw the ball to anyone except the center-fielder?"

"Team play's the stuff, lad," said Bill Bradley. "Stress team play. Twenty-five, twenty-seven, twenty-nine, thirty. Exactly right. Another lesson at the same price?"

He was refused, but never on an exploration had Bill Bradley had so much fun. And never, he reminded himself grimly, had he got so little work done. The Quxas were neglecting their skimpy food plots in their eagerness to play. They were getting lean. Finally, with reluctance, Bill called a temporary halt to baseball.

"Billbrad say no baseball until work done," said Moahlo sadly to Adlaa. "Sometimes Billbrad talk like southpaw pitcher."

Adlaa was trying to cultivate his food plot with the help of a thrag. The beast was of independent mind. It dragged Adlaa in eccentric ovals, in defiance of agricultural needs.

"Adlaa want finish work, play baseball," the Quxa commented. "Thrag no play baseball, say nuts to work. Adlaa be old like Old Hoss Radbourne before work done."

Moahlo contemplated. "Adlaa have trouble his thrag. Moahlo have trouble his. Moahlo help Adlaa his thrag and Adlaa help Moahlo his. Get work done more faster."

Adlaa dismissed the revolutionary thought. "Quxas not do."

"We play baseball run down play," argued Moahlo. "Play together. You throw ball me. I throw ball you. Yippee. Man out."

"Same team. Old pals. Want sing team song?"

"Want play team with thrag."

Adlaa considered the matter in this new light. "Like ball game," he said at last in amazement.

"Sure. You, me be us together. Make thrag look like busher."

They both took hold of the thrag. Unable to resist their combined strengths, the beast submitted docilely. They began to work.

Glancing out from his labor in the headquarters pneuma-hut, Bill saw the incident in happy surprise. Perhaps, after all, his stay here might produce something to help the culture that Montgomery would introduce upon his return. He had no doubt of Montgomery's success.

Neither, for that matter, had Montgomery. At the main camp, things were going swimmingly.

The camp lay on the very fringe of the Quxa territory, but, by an arduous hunt, Ratakka had captured eight wandering Quxas to whom he immediately set about teaching the duties of subjects. His method was simple—the Quxa followed his orders, which he obtained from Montgomery, or the Quxa was knocked down. If he still refused, he was knocked down again. Within three weeks, Ratakka had them doing things no Quxas ever had done before. They performed them reluctantly and sullenly, but they did them.

Seeing the result, but not the means, Candy was enthusiastic.

"They're working together!" she cried. "Oh, Monty, what will the Quxas do to reward you?"

"Oh, they'll probably make a culture god of me," said Montgomery, managing to look modest. "Like the Greeks did to that Martian, Proma Ss Thaa, who taught them the use of fire."

As time went on, though, the girl began to have doubts.

"But they're doing everything for Ratakka," she protested. "As far as they're concerned themselves, they're more wretched than before."

"That's the way feudal cultures are built, my dear," Montgomery assured her. "The king gives them law and a fighting leader. In return, the subjects take care of his bodily comfort."

"But they look so unhappy!"

"In saving an inferior race, we cannot be concerned too much about the happiness of a few miserable members. Perhaps in three hundred years or so, they can afford happiness."

And finally an incident happened to complete her disillusionment.

One of Ratakka's morose subjects managed to slip the shackles with which he was bound at night and make a bolt for freedom. The king pursued him relentlessly, brought him back and then beat him, coldly and cruelly, slugging and gouging and kicking.

Ashen-faced, Candy moved to interfere; Montgomery restrained her.

"We're saving a race," he said. "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

Candy turned and ran sobbing to her quarters, unable to dispel the memory of the writhing body on the ground.

The next day was the day to move equipment. It was a policy of the expeditions to leave their wornout machines for the most friendly of the native races, who could dismantle them and use the parts. The equipment not worth toting back to Earth was to be taken to the advance camp, where the Quxa center was. Montgomery also planned that day to take Ratakka to his kingdom.

A few minutes ahead of the motorcade, Candy slipped out, got into a battered half-track and started driving the eighty miles to the advance camp. For the first twenty-five miles, she told herself that her eagerness was because it was a nice day and she wanted to get out of camp.

For the next twenty-five miles, she called herself a liar.

For the third twenty-five miles she gave herself up unashamedly to thinking about Bill Bradley: his smile, his gentleness, the awkward grace of his lean body. Not a man to set a planet on fire—but how pleasant and restful to have around!

She wondered if he would forgive the way she had acted. Somehow she was sure he would.

The narrow vehicular trail ran through a grove of fernlike trees. It's just over the rise, Candy thought, just over the rise and down into the saucer, where Bill is waiting....

The half-track struck a rock, lurched, threw a tread and went off the road, out of control.

That did not matter especially, for the Quxas could use the material very well where it was. Candy went forward briskly afoot. A fallen branch brushed her ankle. Unheedingly, she kicked it away. She began to reconstruct Bill, feature by feature: the way his hair swirled on his forehead; his eyebrows, arched and regular; his eyes, wide, deep-seated, with inner pools of merriment; his nose, straight and rather ...

Another branch caught her. She lifted her foot to free it. It did not come free. Another tentacle moved around her, pinioning her right arm to her side. She whirled in terror and found herself in the grip of the horals.

There were a dozen of the horrors, their antenna ears erect, mandibles open. They exuded an acid odor, a sign of hunger. Candy screamed. She fought to reach her pistol, strapped to her right hip. More tentacles stopped her. She screamed and screamed again, throwing her body to shake off the grip, trying to kick with her feet.

There was a movement in the road at the top of the rise. For a moment, elation surged in Candy, almost stifling her. Perhaps some expedition member had heard her, was hurrying to her rescue. Then she saw that the newcomers were Quxas. Hope vanished, leaving her limp and hollow. To be killed by these horrors was bad enough, but to be killed in the presence of a group of piebald morons, who would stand and watch and moan, but not lift a hand ...

In her agitation, she did not notice that the Quxas were nine in number and wore baseball caps. They drew short clubs, shaped like bats.

"Kill the umpire!" they shouted, hatred born of diamond conflicts in their cry. "Kill the umpire!" they yelled and charged.

In military formation, they clubbed their way through their enemies, battering and smashing until Candy was free, with a dozen dying horals on the ground, their tentacles contracting and writhing. The Quxa leader made his bobbing bow to her.



"How do," he said politely. "We dip them in calcimine vat, you bet. We hang them out like wash. Now we give team yell."

The Quxas put their arms around each other's shoulders. In unison, they chanted:

"Hoe tomata; hoe potata
Half past alligata,
Bum, bum, bulligata,
Chickala dah!
Pussycats! Pussycats!
Rah! Rah! Rah!"

"Pussycats," the leader explained to Candy, "are honored animal on planet where Billbrad is head cheese."

"I'll bet you play baseball nicely," Candy said.

Woe broke forth on nine broad faces.

"Misfortunately not," confessed the captain. "Thirty-three teams in Quxa town. Pussycats in thirty-third place." He brightened. "Go ivory hunt now. Catch nine new Quxas. Teach 'em baseball. Then maybe we beat 'em and not be in cellar any more."

Together, the team bobbed politely to Candy and trotted down the road.

Happily, Candy went up the rise, then stopped in astonishment, looking at Quxa town.

Gone was the straggling, haphazard settlement, with the flimsy huts and untended starvation patches where individual Quxas tried to raise their own food. Instead, building sites were laid out in straight, broad rows, and Quxas were working, three and four in a group, raising substantial homes of timber. Others were surrounding the settlement with a wall of brambles, impenetrable to horals. Teams of men, two to a thrag, were plowing, preparing large fields for tillage. And down the side of the settlement, affectionately tended, ran a line of baseball fields.

Just off the road, a Quxa squatted, baseball cap on his head, watching a crude sun dial.

"Nice day for game," he greeted Candy.

Speechless with surprise, the girl made a dazed questioning gesture toward the improvements.

"Billbrad do it," the Quxa informed her. "He tell us how. Work one by one, he say, work all time to fill belly, maybe fill horal belly instead. Work all by all, do more quick. Have time in afternoon. Batter up! Sock it, boy! Wing it home, he sliding!"

The sun's shadow touched a peg.

"Five minute!" bawled the Quxa.

The laborers quit work, put away their tools. The farmers herded their thrags into a strongly constructed corral. The natives gathered in knots at the settlement edge and looked longingly at the baseball fields.

"Yestday I fool Billbrad," confided the Quxa. "I hide ball, catch him off second. Billbrad get all red face and say—"

"Never mind what Bill said," Candy interjected hastily.

The shadow touched another peg.

"Play ball!" the Quxa yelled. "Play ball! Play ball! Play ball!"

He sprang up, produced a baseball glove and spat into it reverently.

"I go play now. You come see. Get scorecard, know players."

He looked at Candy hopefully.

"Specially me," he added.

Out of the moil of Quxas came the lank form of Bill Bradley. He spied the girl, whooped and came running to her. For a few moments they talked at once, in an incoherent and ecstatic jumble. Then Candy, catching control of herself, cited in admiration the change in the Quxa village.

"And you've done all this!" she concluded.

"I didn't do anything!" Bill protested. "They like to play baseball and this sort of happened. We're getting representative government into action now. Each team elects a captain and the captains are the town council. Tonight they're going to vote on naming the settlement Brooklyn."

"You know," said Candy, "I'll bet they'll make you a culture god."

The tanned face of Bill Bradley took on the rose hue of a blush.

"Well, Moahlo carved a statue and they've put it in front of league headquarters—that's their city hall," he admitted uncomfortably. "It doesn't look much like me. I've got six arms because they wanted me batting, pitching and catching a ball all at the same time."

Candy slipped a hand into his.

"Is there a place around here," she asked in a small tone, "where a culture god can take a girl

and—well, talk to her?"

"Is there!" said Bill. "You just come with me ..."

A heavy object bumped into him. He whirled at the touch.

"Oh! Hi, Ratakka," Bill said in a flat voice.

Montgomery's king had returned to his subjects. He was alone—his captives having escaped off the ride over—and he was in vile temper. Glaring evilly, he motioned at the baseball players. He was recalling an advice of Montgomery: "Whatever your subjects like to do most, do it better than they can. In that way, you will get their respect and find it easier to take over."

"What that fool doings-on?" snarled Ratakka. "Ratakka do, too."

Bill's already sagging spirits sank again. With Ratakka's strength and reflexes, the great brute undoubtedly would become the star of stars, gathering admirers to himself and destroying all the pleasant prospects now so happily started. Still, it was Bill's duty to give him every chance ...

"I'll see what team has an opening, Ratakka. Perhaps you'd better bat seventh for a few days. Then you can move to the clean-up spot."

The giant stopped him. "Ratakka not ordinary Quxa; Ratakka a king. Ratakka not play like those serfs. Want special job."

A wild thought struck Bill. On the playing fields were more than two hundred Quxas, most of them with a justified and carefully nurtured dislike for the surly slab of muscle before him. In the old days, they could do nothing individually against him.

But the Quxas had learned to fight as a team. If he could only give them the shadow of an excuse, trap Ratakka into rousing their joint anger, take advantage of the prejudices of their new-found love for baseball, then Ratakka would get the reckoning that he deserved, the days of his supremacy would be over, the threat of his tyranny would be removed from a happy race.

Bill grinned broadly. "Sure thing, old pal," he said.

He took off his own baseball cap and put it backward on Ratakka's head. He signaled for someone to bring over a mask and chest protector.

"There's only one of these at each playing field," Bill explained. "In a way, he's boss of the game. Are you sure you want to do it? Sometimes the players argue with you."

"Anyone argue with Ratakka," the giant said, raising a huge fist, "Ratakka knock 'em down. Ratakka a king, boss of game."

"Okay, boy, you asked for it," Bill said.

He thrust a whiskbroom into Ratakka's hand.

"You can be umpire," said Bill Bradley.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HALF PAST ALLIGATOR ***

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