

# THE FIGHTING FIVE



Noel Jainsbury Jr.

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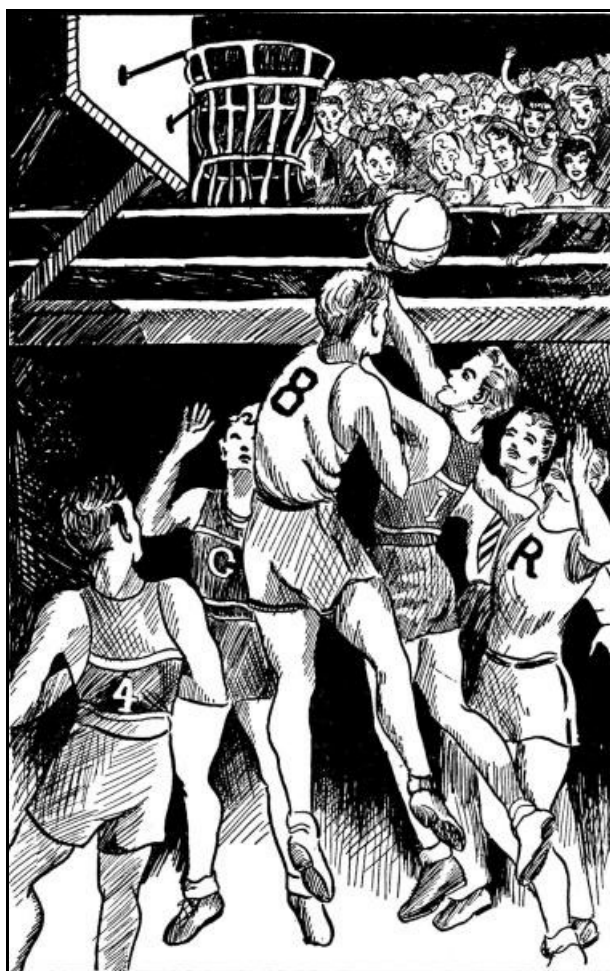
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**The ball changed hands five times.**

# THE FIGHTING FIVE

by  
NOËL SAINSBURY, JR.

*Author of the Billy Smith Series,  
"Cracker Stanton," "Gridiron Grit"*

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK  
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## THE CHAMPION SPORT STORIES

By Noël Sainsbury, Jr.

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CRACKER STANTON  
GRIDIRON GRIT  
THE FIGHTING FIVE

*(Other volumes in preparation)*

CUPPLES & LEON CO.

New York

*To*  
CHARLES HADLEY MINOR

*Athlete, sportsman and all-round  
good fellow*

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# CHAPTER I

## THE FIRST HALF

Pop Parker, Clarkville's veteran basketball coach, had developed a team that was a *team* this season; by far the most outstanding basketball team to represent the famous old prep school in years. Careful grooming of exceptionally good basketball material had done the trick. Charlie Minor, Zip Young, Shorty Fiske, Monk Leeming and Bull Brown had been dubbed the Fighting Five for, though they had climbed to the finals in the state interscholastic tournament, they had fought hard every inch of the way.

To-night they were up against Ridgetown High, last year's champions, as hard playing and as hard boiled an aggregation as ever stepped onto a basketball court. The final contest for the state championship was being held in the capital city and Coach Parker had engaged rooms for the Clarkville squad at one of the city's large hotels. The team and substitutes had finished their light and early supper, and the Coach was saying a few last words of caution before they left for the State College Gymnasium where the final battle was to be staged at 8 P. M.

"We're going to win to-night, fellows," he said, his keen eyes scanning the ten serious faces grouped around his room. "I'm sure of that and here's the reason why I'm sure. We're up against a team of stars and not a *star team*. Individually, every fellow on Ridgetown's five plays brilliant basketball, and just because of that fact we've got the bulge on them. Listen to me—and we'll make that brilliancy react to their defeat. As a *team* we can win. And if any fellow starts playing to the gallery to-night I'll jerk him off the floor, for only by concentrated action can Clarkville win. I'm not a bit worried about center tip-off plays. Shorty's at least three inches taller than Ridgetown's center and holds the advantage; but if you don't follow Charlie's signals from start to finish, we're whipped before we start. *Quick break* offensives are going to win this game as they've won your other games. The whole secret of this offensive, as you all know, is to get down and place your one or two shots before the other side has his defense organized properly. And to-night, remember, you'll be playing against five individual stars, each doing his best to score, and not a properly organized defense. No matter whether you're using the three line rush, the crisscross or whatever Charlie decides on, remember that to-night of all nights, whatever plan you use, *speed* is everything.

"On the other hand, the secret of effective defensive play lies in making the quick shift from offensive play to the defensive as every team has to do the instant the ball is lost to a player on the other side. But your play to-night must change from offense to defense like lightning—and it takes a smart heads-up athlete to do this in a flash. With this speedy aggregation you're opposing, you'll use the man-to-man rather than the zone defense unless otherwise signaled.

"Just one thing more and then we'll go. This evening your sportsmanship is going to be tested to the limit. But no matter what Ridgetown may or may not do, I don't want any of you to waste your time staging comebacks and trying tricks that are against the rules. Whoever does that isn't playing the game. He's not doing the best by his team and for Clarkville. Use your cleverness to-night to play basketball and keep your tempers. Also bear in mind that the referee has a hard job watching every play of every player. He is bound to make a mistake now and then. If you think he's wrong, don't waste time and energy squawking. Tell him what you think is the truth and then abide by his decision. Be good sports. No other kind of player can get far in basketball. If there's any dirty work on the floor to-night see that Clarkville's name is clear. Now—" Coach Parker grinned his famous grin—"enough's enough, men. Go in and win. You can do it and you're *going* to do it! Let's go."

The clock in the hotel lobby marked the hour of seven when Pop and his charges stepped out of the elevator. Outside, a blizzard roared and whistled and the snow, dry as salt, stung like red-hot cinders. March's lionlike proclivities were making good this year, and with the winter's snow still banked high in the streets and this extended sub-zero weather, spring seemed a long way off. The Clarkville contingent did not linger on the sidewalk. With woolen caps pulled down well over ears and overcoat collars turned up, they piled into the two waiting cars and were off.

Even with a good forty-five minutes to spare before scheduled game time, the lads from Clarkville found a huge crowd lined up outside the Gymnasium.

"Reserved sections were sold out yesterday," Coach Parker told them. "That's the bleacher crowd. We're going to have a capacity house to-night in spite of the weather."

"How many does the place seat?" asked Monk Leeming.

"Something over four thousand, I believe."

Four thousand! A tingling sensation crept up and down Monk's spine as he exchanged glances with his fellow team members. Never had they played before a great crowd like this.

"Well, well, well," muttered Zip to Charlie. "I guess the sports writers would call it a thrilling sight—place like this packed to the doors with basketball fans. But somehow or other I'd feel a lot cosier if the gallery was going to be smaller."

But Coach Parker gave his players no time to develop stage fright. He hustled them out of the automobiles and the next moment they were pushing their way through the milling throng amid cheers from those who recognized them, and reached the dressing rooms in short order.

The crack Ridgetown quintet which had breezed through every game so far in easy fashion undoubtedly held the odds. Their spectacular individual work had gained them the title of the Shooting Stars and nobody disputed the fact that they had been well named. On the other hand no team in the tournament had capitalized on this individual brilliancy as Coach Parker shrewdly meant to do. The fans and sports writers who knew that wily gentleman predicted that he would have some sort of surprise on tap, and that despite Ridgetown's advantage in height and weight, Clarkville would certainly make it a game worth watching. In fact, those who had studied the methods of the Fighting Five were quite sure that although to-night the Ridgetown Shooting Stars might blaze across the basketball horizon with even more spectacular exhibitions of goal tossing than usual, they would be up against a powerful, smooth-running machine and Clarkville would be in for the fight of their lives.

With the exception of Shorty Fiske, Clarkville's sky-reaching center, who stood all of six feet five in his rubber soles and weighed a good two hundred, the Clarkville five, a sturdy crew, were pygmies beside the big bruisers from the factory town.

The atmosphere of the big gym was charged with excitement as the referee's whistle called time for play. The capital city band vied with Clarkville and Ridgetown rooters to lift the roof, while non-partisan spectators, who had come to cheer for both teams, according to their fancy, swelled the ear-splitting din.

Just behind the press stand sat a man talking into a microphone, for the game to-night was news to every basketball enthusiast in the state and the fans would be listening in. The radio announcer was saying:

"Ah, here we go, folks—the ball up at center! Fiske gets the tip-off from Ridgetown, he taps the ball to Captain Minor, who slings it back to right guard Leeming and starts running forward.—Say, folks, this is pretty. Leeming snaps the ball back to Fiske—Fiske over to Minor. Zip Young, Clarkville's midget left forward, is waiting for it almost below the basket—and shoots his goal! Score is Clarkville two Ridgetown nothing in the first two seconds of play.—Hear the crowd yell!

"There they go again. Fiske gets the tip-off but the ball is intercepted," went on the announcer. "Black, Ridgetown's left forward, is dribbling it down the court, and say, folks, he's a wonder. He's dodged three of the Fighting Five and slaps it across to Chester who soaks it to the Ridgetown center.—No, he doesn't! Shorty Fiske's got the ball and slings it to Minor, Minor to Young, back to Minor! Yep, I thought so. There goes Clarkville through for another score. Smart playing, that. And believe me, folks, these lads are fast! The score now stands Clarkville four Ridgetown nothing."

There was a momentary silence on the air as the two teams lined up again.

"They're at it again," the radio voice resumed. "There goes Clarkville through for another basket! It's six to nothing now—say, this is beautiful teamwork. Ball changed hands five times on the way to the iron hoop. . . ." Then, half a minute later—"Clarkville again. They're wiping up the Ridgetown huskies, all right. A corking shot by Leeming, their right guard, on a pass from center. Eight to nothing in no time at all and it doesn't look so good for Ridgetown. They've called for time out to talk things over. . . ."

"And there they go again. It's a real ball game now. Those Ridgetown lads have tightened up on their defense and believe it or not they're tearing in! Clarkville's having a harder time breaking through. Rough work, too. The whistle's blowing every half second. Ah, there goes Ridgetown for a basket—her first score! Hear the crowd roar! It was Black on a long shot that bounced off the backboard and dropped through. A clever shot but between you and me and the mike, folks, if the Ridgetown five want to bring up their score they'd better let down on star plays to the gallery and develop the old teamwork. That's where the bunch from Clarkville has the bulge on them. As I told you just now the referee's whistle is kept busy tooting for fouls, most of which are accidental due to the speed of the game. Ridgetown is making the greater percentage and they're pulling some pretty raw stuff—so are both teams to be exact. Many a game, folks, is won by the

team that cashes in on the free throws after fouls and it isn't always the outfit that gets the most free throws that scores the most points—it's the squad that recovers the ball most readily after the free throw is missed—and right now that's where the hill billies from Clarkville are shining. We've got to hand it to those boys. Man to man, Ridgetown outweighs them and I might say now that they outplay them—but when it comes to teamwork and real basketball, Clarkville is superb!"

The announcer again . . . along toward the end of the second quarter. . . . "Say, folks, this is the hottest basketball game I've ever witnessed. It's a fact! The score's now thirteen to thirteen. Bad luck for some one, you say? Some fight, believe me. Both teams are flashing a marvelous defense. The Ridgetown boys are too fond of stalling. For one thing they dribble too long and too often. Three times now they've lost the ball for failure to advance it out of the back court on the ten seconds rule. And funnily enough their guards have scored more than their forwards so far—and on long shots. Spectators here are just about cuckoo, for the long shots get the gallery. But Clarkville team *is* a team—and their teamwork—Uh-oh! Clarkville's teamwork slipped through that time and it's got the Shooting Stars worried, believe me. My, that was pretty—a quick break offensive. Right guard took the ball off the backboard, quickly passed it to right forward, who was on the right side line. By that time center moved over to the same side, but near mid-court. Right forward passed to center and rushed for the basket. In the meantime left forward cut for the basket and received a pass from center. An under-the-basket shot. Two more points. Zip Young made 'em. His third field goal of the game.—There goes the whistle! Half over. Clarkville leading, fifteen to thirteen! . . . Stand by, please."

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## CHAPTER II

### MEN IN MASKS

The door of Clarkville's dressing room had no more than closed on the team, the substitutes and Coach Parker, when it suddenly opened again. Six men muffled to the ears in fur coats slipped into the room and the door slammed shut behind them. The faces of these newcomers were hidden behind black silk masks and each man held a snub-nosed automatic revolver in his hand.

"The honorable gentlemen will be good enough to line up against the wall—*at once!*"

The order came from the masked leader who stood slightly in advance of his fellows. The voice was smooth and purring, but every chap in the room knew instinctively that this man meant business and that to disobey meant death.

For a fraction of a second Coach Parker stared at their principal adversary, then, beckoning the team to follow him, he walked over to the back wall.

"Come along, boys," he said quietly. "These men are armed; we are not. The sooner we line up and they find that we have no valuables worthy of their trouble, the sooner they will finish and go."

"The honorable gentlemen," went on the masked bandit, "will turn their faces to the wall . . . and there will be no talking, except by me, if you please."

Charlie Minor was mending a broken shoelace when the gunmen appeared, and for a moment he entertained the thought of making a dash for the farther door that led to the showers and lavatories. Then he remembered that these rooms had no other exit, and even if he wasn't shot out of hand he knew he'd be caught like a rat in a trap. So deciding for the present at least to obey orders and wait for a better opportunity, he stood up, gave his captors a single, searching glance and took his place at the end of the line.

Charlie was a quick-witted chap. His eyes now saw nothing but the gray-green wall of the locker room, but mentally he saw several things and saw them plainly. The glance he'd given the gunmen told him that every one of them was short and small boned. The leader spoke English without accent, but somehow his inflection was peculiar—and then the use of the adjective "honorable" . . .

"A Chinaman or a Jap!" thought Charles wonderingly. "Dollars to doughnuts the rest of 'em are the same. What in thunderation can they want of us?"

This he was soon to discover. The leader's voice, with its slightly singsong tone, was in his ears once more.

"The following gentlemen will take two steps backward and right-about-face . . . Mr. Charlie Minor!"

Charlie, dark, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered, and a generous five-foot-eleven, took the two steps backward and swung round as the speaker called the next name.

"Mr. Zip Young!"

Zip, a light-haired, birdlike little fellow, followed Charlie's lead.

Next called was Shorty Fiske, the team's huge center, and it was quite evident from the big fellow's expression that he was furiously angry. Nevertheless, he did as he was bid, scowling savagely at the maskers.

After him came Monk Leeming, a tall, debonair fellow, handsome and one of the best athletes in Clarkville School. Monk was followed in short order by Bull Brown's stocky figure.

The masked leader of the gunmen glanced at his wrist watch. "Gentlemen of the Clarkville School Basketball Team," he said in his toneless singsong, "you are about to leave this place with me."

"Where do you propose to take us?" Charlie Minor's voice betrayed not the slightest tremor of excitement.

"You will be good enough not to ask questions," the masked one returned. "I can allow you no more than five minutes to take a shower and dress. To use your American vernacular—snap into it. Dressed or not, all will be escorted to the cars when the five minutes are up. And you will not talk, please."

He waved toward the shower room and the five members of the team ran for it. There they found one of the armed

maskers standing guard. The man had already turned on the water in five of the showers, so without a word, they stripped, stood for a second or two under the lukewarm streams, hurriedly rubbed down and ran back to the locker room. Pop Parker and the substitutes were still lined up facing the back wall while the gang leader menaced their backs with his gun, smoking a cigarette the while. As they appeared he said a few sharp words to his satellites in a strange tongue, then spoke again in his precise English.

"My men will now help you gentlemen dress. Permit me to remind you that we leave here in just three minutes."

Charlie, Zip, Monk and Bull were only too glad of this rather surprising assistance. None of them liked being kidnaped, but knowing that resistance was futile, and not enjoying the idea of going out into an arctic night partially clothed, they were making the best possible speed.

But Shorty Fiske was a quick-tempered, arrogant lad and although he got into his clothes with the speed of a West Point cadet, he was boiling over with a righteous wrath that destroyed his usual good judgment. It particularly irritated him to be forced to take orders from men half his size and weight, and while he threw on his things he made up his mind to grasp the first opening offered to put one of these gangsters out of the running—even if he stopped a bullet for his pains. He doubted that the leader would shoot to kill, and if his scheme proved successful, it would not be himself but his masked valet who would receive the leader's bullet. For now that the little men were as busy as the boys they were assisting, their guns were no longer in their hands, but in the pockets of the fur coats they wore.

Presently Shorty's chance came. His valet was holding out coat and vest for him, when he suddenly swung round and his powerful hands gripped the little man by the shoulders. Shorty's plan was to hurl his valet bodily at the masked gang leader, and there is no doubt that in the ordinary course of events the jaunty gentleman with the gun and the cigarette would have gone down like a lone ninepin. Fiske was strong as an ox and his adversary no more than a featherweight. But as things turned out, it did not work that way.

Later on, neither the members of the team who witnessed the fracas nor Shorty himself were able to tell exactly what took place. All that young Fiske knew was that the masker seemed to slip through his fingers, there came a sharp pain on his right calf, a blow on his Adam's apple that hurt even more, if possible; and he found himself flat on his back staring up at the blue-black muzzle of his antagonist's automatic.

"That, Mr. Fiske," the masked leader told him pleasantly, "is known as jiu jitsu, a form of Japanese wrestling you may have heard of. Now get up and finish dressing, but let me remind you that I or any member of my little company can take excellent care of any or all of you without the help of our guns. Next time the treatment will be much more severe. We don't want to be forced to hurt any of you gentlemen, but your next taste of jiu jitsu will leave you helpless and crippled for three or four hours at least. And now that the time is up," he concluded, "we go."

"But—I say!" expostulated Mr. Parker from his position at the wall. "If this holdup is a matter of ransom, why not come to some agreement now? It will save all involved much worry and trouble."

"You are a clever man, Mr. Parker," the chief replied easily, as the five teammates were marshaled toward the door under their armed guard. "This is certainly a holdup, but time, as you realize, is more precious than money to me just at present. I have the honor to bid you farewell."

"You'll never get away with it!" retorted Squirty Pennell, one of the substitute forwards. "Kidnaping is a hanging matter in this state. Every single one of you will swing for this!"

The masked leader ushered the little procession into the corridor, still keeping a bead on the fellows lined up.

"You are misinformed as to your state laws, young man," he replied urbanely. "I detest American slang, but the only answer I have time to give you is *horse feathers!*"

The door slammed behind him and those left in the room heard the key turn in the lock.

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## CHAPTER III

### HORSE FEATHERS

Again the radio announcer was talking into the microphone above the Gymnasium floor. This time, however, his usual clear-cut diction was slurred and his tone betrayed keen excitement.

"Well, folks!" he said breathlessly, "I've kept you waiting a long time and I apologize—but say, something absolutely unprecedented in the history of sport has happened right here in the State College Gym during the last few minutes. The Clarkville School basketball team has been kidnaped! Believe it or not, I'm telling you the unadulterated truth. The crowd here is just getting wise to the fact and the place is in an uproar. Do you hear 'em? The noise is so great I can hardly hear my own voice. And take it from me, the police on duty are having all they can do to prevent a riot.

"So far as I can find out the facts are these. Masked men entered Clarkville's dressing room shortly after the team went there between halves and after forcing the Fighting Five to get into their clothes and overcoats at the point of a revolver, the gangsters spirited them away. The kidnaped players are Captain Charlie Minor, Zip Young, Shorty Fiske, Monk Leeming and Bull Brown. The city and state police and the federal authorities have been notified and the search is on. Descriptions of the kidnaped players are as follows—"

The mike man talked for a few minutes more, then requested his unseen audience who hung on his words to stand by while he sought further information.

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After breaking open the door of their locker-room, Coach Parker and the Clarkville substitutes had rushed into the corridor to find it empty and the birds flown. The sound of hammering and banging came from behind closed doors on both sides of the long, narrow hall. Paying no attention to frantic shouts of their imprisoned rivals, the Clarkville delegation sprinted down the length of the hall to the side entrance of the building, only to find that it was locked from the outside!

Back they rushed to the inner end of the corridor leading to the Gymnasium floor—and here again they were locked in. By his time the Ridgetown team had smashed their door panels and broken into the corridor, fighting mad at the trick they believed had been played upon them. Hurried explanations were made and Mr. Parker held a short conference with the Ridgetown coach. A couple of benches were dragged out of the locker rooms, and using them as rams, Clarkville went to work on the side door of the building, while Ridgetown commenced to batter down the door to the Gym floor. The latter was a much easier job than the door through which the kidnapers and their victims had escaped and the Shooting Stars had its panels and lock smashed long before the heavy oak at the other end of the corridor had begun to splinter.

The alarm was sent out, officials and the police were at once notified, but by the time a search of the premises could be started there was not a sign of the masked band that had carried away the Fighting Five.

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Once more the radio announcer was back at his microphone:

"Here I am again, folks!" he was saying. "It took me longer than I expected. This place is bedlam, now that the four thousand people who were watching the game have gotten onto what happened between halves. And there's a good-sized riot going on here right now. Seems a whole lot more like a State asylum filled with loonies on the loose than the State College Gym packed to the rafters with disappointed basketball fans. I've lost a perfectly good derby, at least it was a good derby until a lady with hysterics and an umbrella took a swipe at it just by way of showing her interest—ha! ha! And my coat is ripped straight down the back. No, I'm not bidding for a new one. This little aside is just to give you a better idea of the way these excited fans are getting the old dander up.

"It seems now that this gang of masked gunmen must be either Japs or Chinese. Probably the former, as they efficiently jiu jitsued Shorty Fiske when he showed fight. The Yellow Peril in kidnaping is old stuff in Asia, but a new departure so far as this country is concerned. However, there's no need to get het up about it. This is evidently a private gang that the

authorities are up against and the fact that this wholesale kidnaping was pulled off by Orientals should make their apprehension less difficult. But the only trouble is that their nationality, or rather their race, is the one and only clew they left. They locked up everybody they found in the corridor to the locker-rooms, and since a twelve-below zero night with a first-class blizzard going on doesn't encourage street loitering, nobody, so far as we can find out, saw their cars leave the side entrance to the building. There's a chance, of course, that they may be held up by the storm. The snow is already very heavy and it's drifting fast in this forty-mile wind. On the other hand the weather hinders the pursuit, too.

"Hello! Here come the police reserves. . . . They are clearing the place—and it's about time if you want my opinion. I'm out a hat and an overcoat but there's no sense in smashing this mike as well, and that's what I've been expecting for the last ten minutes or so . . . oh—something I forgot to tell you—must admit this riot has flustered me a bit . . . I omitted to say that when Squirty Pennell, substitute Clarkville forward, threatened the masked leader, that surprising gentleman of the Orient shot back the well-known phrase, 'horse feathers!'—And that, so far as the pursuit of these criminals and their five captives is concerned sums up the business. The Horse Feathers gang is on their way and now for further information, you will be kept in touch with all new developments by the studio direct. This is Station A.B.C.D.E. . . . Reginald Montmorency speaking and I am signing off now, folks. . . . Good night!"

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When Charlie Minor, at his armed captor's side, passed from the locker-room corridor into the night, the snow-swept wind of the blizzard fairly blew him off his feet. He and the little Jap headed the line and instinctively they ducked the lash of the storm that cut like a frozen whip. The Jap tore his mask from his face, grasped his prisoner's arm and together they fought their way round the corner of the building and into the teeth of the storm.

Below the long flight of broad stone steps now deep with drifted snow that led from the main entrance to the street, the automobiles of the spectators inside the Gymnasium were parked along the curbs up and down the street as far as the eye could reach. The two policemen on duty had, as became known later, taken shelter from the blizzard within the Gymnasium's deep vestibule. Except for the drivers of the six big cars with idling motors, lined up in the middle of the street, not a soul was in sight.

Since the gangster's automatic effectually prevented any chance of escape, and with the memory of the competent manner in which Shorty's rebellion had been quelled still fresh in his mind, Charlie decided that firearms and jiu jitsu held the odds. Therefore, he came tractably enough, allowing the man to pilot him to the first of the waiting cars. No sooner had they taken their places, than the chauffeur let in his clutch and they rolled away. Charlie was surprised that no attempt was made to blindfold him or to prevent him from peering out of the car windows. A glance through the rear gave him a blurred picture of the other fellows entering the automobiles behind, each with a Japanese gunman for company. Then as his own conveyance increased the lead, the others faded into the dim glow of headlights and Charlie turned to look at his guard.

That gentleman was complacently smoking a cigarette and, although the automatic was not in evidence, Captain Minor knew that it would be quickly in hand in case of need.

"Do you speak English?" he asked.

"Uh-huh!" answered the dark figure in the opposite corner of the seat. "Do you speak Japanese?"

Charlie chuckled. "Not so you'd notice it."

"Then let's speak American, Mr. Minor."

"Okay. It seems even Japanese kidnapers have a sense of humor."

"Well, why not?"

"Far be it from me to criticize, but you seem to be taking things pretty easily."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Minor?"

"Well—er—contrary to kidnaping procedure as I understand it, you haven't tied me up, or even pulled down the window shades. We might be taking a friendly spin together so far as appearances go."

"That," said the gunman, "is exactly the big idea. What the people who see us pass don't know about this little ride won't hurt them—or us. If they saw a blindfolded man sitting beside me, or shaded windows all around the car, they'd be suspicious. And that might prove unhealthy, certainly for them—and possibly for us!"

"Got it all planned out on a common sense basis, I see—Mr.—er—I don't think we've been formally introduced?" said Charlie with a grin.

"Number Two will do for the present." The gunman flicked the ash from his cigarette into the metal container at the side of the car. "When you get to know us better, Mr. Minor, you'll understand that common sense is our middle name. Naturally, you're a bit sore at being yanked away from your basketball in this impromptu manner. I'd feel the same if our positions were reversed. If you'll take a well-meant tip, you'll accept the inevitable. On the whole I'm sure you won't regret it. Otherwise—but why discuss such an unpleasant alternative?"

Charlie, who had been staring out the window into the snowy night, turned toward his companion.

"Otherwise what?" he inquired. "I don't happen to like bowing to fate, or whatever you call it. But I'm interested in that alternative. How about it, Number Two?" He leaned forward. "If I should suddenly decide that distance lends enchantment and make a break to get away, would you shoot to kill?"

The Oriental answered him unmoved. "My orders are to take no chances. You have a saying—dead men tell no tales."

"Oh—exactly. But they generally raise the dickens of a—pardon the vulgar word—stink! I don't believe that gun of yours would actually enter any discussion we might have. I'll bet anything you like that your orders from Mister Horse Feathers, or Number One, I suppose he is, are to rely on the good old jiu jitsu alone. How about it, buddy? Do my words of wisdom hit the well-known nail on the head or do they not?"

"On the well-known thumb, more likely," laughed the Jap gunman. "My orders are to lay you out as cold and stiff as an Eskimo's fishline, if necessary. Those were the boss' exact words. However, I feel certain I could handle you, Mr. Charlie Minor, and two or three more like you—without my gun."

"Turn me into an Eskimo fishline just the same, eh?"

"Your perception is almost human," his captor remarked affably. "And even if by an unheard-of stroke of luck you should put me out of the running, our chauffeur would make sure of you."

"Do you think he could hear us scrapping through the glass—with his engine running?"

"He wouldn't need to count on that. All I have to do is to touch that button over there and he will turn his head. He is armed, I need hardly mention."

"Oh, of course, I take that for granted," Charlie replied, making certain mental reservations as he did so.

"Also," went on the Jap, "remember that there are other cars right behind us. They'd pick you up the minute anything went wrong in here—such as, for instance, my dropping dead of heart failure, which I'm not likely to do," he added dryly.

"Got it all fixed, all right, haven't you?" Charlie lapsed into silence after that retort.

His captor yawned and lit another cigarette. The more he saw of young Americans, the more stupid he found them. No Japanese youth, he meditated, would rebel against fate like the silly fellow he escorted; nor would a sensible Japanese lad carry on a pointless conversation just for the sake of talking.

Had Number Two known that Charlie had studied jiu jitsu under the famous Nugochi and was, in the words of Clarkville, "a bug on Japanese wrestling," he might not have been so complacent. He would have been even less so had he realized that Charlie had purposely steered the conversation into its channel, and had gained considerable information thereby. Then again that young man spoke and, as before, with a particular end in view.

"Much of a trip ahead?"

"With luck," the man answered, "We ought to be home shortly after eleven o'clock."

"Don't suppose you'll tell me why the five of us have been kidnaped or where we're bound?"

"Neither one nor the other. If you can memorize the course we're taking, you're welcome to do it."

"Not much chance! If you can see more than ten feet on either side of us now that we're out in the country, you've got better eyes than yours truly. And I'm not familiar with this part of the state, anyway."

"Not easy to figure whether we're headed north, south, east or west, eh?"

"Oh, I've kept track of the general direction or directions, I should say."

"You have?"

"Certainly."

"But what airmen call the visibility is practically nil."

"I know it."

"Oh, you do, eh! What's the sense of a foolish bluff, then?"

"I'm not bluffing, Mister Number Two."

"I'm from Missouri, Mister Captain Charlie Minor!"

"I doubt it," laughed Charlie, "but just the same I'll put you wise."

"Come across. I'll tell you if you're right."

"Well, it's like this, and quite simple. The storm has been blowing out of the northwest all day. And I noticed that the wind hadn't changed any when you herded me into this Lincoln. We ran south out of the city, kept on in that direction for a few miles. Then we turned east, then northeast, and now we're headed almost into the wind and therefore approximately northwest. I've been watching the snowflakes, pal. How about it,—do I win?"

"You're not quite as dumb as you look," Number Two admitted ungraciously.

"I can't say as much for you," Charlie returned without malice.

"The trouble with you Americans," growled the gunman, "is that the dumber you grow, the more cocky you are."

Charlie chuckled. "You're left-handed," he remarked conversationally, "and sitting on my right."

"Wonderful guesser," derided Number Two. "How did you figure that one out?"

"*Horse Feathers!*" said Charlie.

Like a snake in the darkness his own left arm shot out and his sinewy fingers snapped down upon the gunman's left wrist.

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## CHAPTER IV

### CHARLIE MAKES A BREAK

As Charlie grabbed the gunman's wrist with his left hand, he jerked the arm straight, passed his own right arm over and under and grasped his left wrist with the fingers of his right hand. His right arm now had become a lever beneath the Jap's left elbow and the slightest pressure of Charlie's right wrist would not only cause his captor exquisite pain, but break his arm at the elbow.

No one knew this better than the astonished Number Two. He accordingly remained absolutely silent and passive.

"If that gun of yours explodes, you'll get a sweet compound fracture," Captain Minor promised grimly. "And don't let go of it till I give the word." Charlie then brought the man's arm across his own knees and exerted slight pressure. Number Two winced under the torture thus provided, the numbed fingers opened automatically and the revolver dropped on the seat to Charlie's left. Further pressure was applied and as his victim groaned in agony, Charlie released his hold, caught up the gun and rammed its stub-nosed muzzle into the Jap's ribs.

"Food for the goose, you know!" he said a bit breathlessly. "By the way, do you wear a belt or suspenders?"

"A belt, confound you!"

"Okay, brother. Produce said belt, if you please, and make it snappy. You might remember that if you try any tricks, this gun will surely go off. Use your right hand—I know your left is temporarily out of commission, as 't were."

The Jap made no reply, but he unfastened his fur coat, pulled the belt from about his waist and dropped it onto Charlie's knees.

"Thanks. Now turn sideways with your back to me. That's the boy! Now reach for the roof with your right hand and bring the left slowly round behind you. . . . Perfect! I fear I must work slowly, but that's out of compliment to you. You may not feel it, but your trusty weapon is still pressing the old bear-skin. By the way, that's not a bad raccoon—suppose you just slip out of it—I may need it later in my business. . . . Thanks. Now, up with the right arm again and bring the other round back as you were before. That's fine,—but please relax a bit. I've only one hand I can use on this job of making all secure. . . . The belt's round your left arm now, so lower your right and push it back toward me. . . . Slowly—that's it!"

Charlie belted Number Two's arms firmly together just above the elbows. "Let's see," he continued, placing the automatic on the seat within easy reach. "We need something for your wrists. Sorry, but I'll have to borrow your beautiful necktie, since my own still reposes in the State College gym. And that swank silk muffler you're wearing will be just the thing to keep your feet from misbehaving. Turn round now, so you're facing forward again. . . ."

Number Two was forthwith relieved of his haberdashery and soon his wrists and ankles met the same fate as his arms.

"There you are!" Charlie surveyed his handiwork with satisfaction and draped the fur coat over the Jap's shoulders, for the car was none too warm. "All dressed up and no place to go, what? Too bad I had to make you a little uncomfortable, but I'm just selfish enough to feel a whole lot cosier this way—and I know you won't mind bowing to the inevitable!"

"I've got to hand it to you, young man." Number Two appeared to bear no malice.

Charlie chuckled. "You thought I was something out of the flowerbed, didn't you?"

"Who taught you that armhold?" asked the Jap.

"Countryman of yours, name of Nugochi. Maybe you've heard of him?"

The Jap stared. "Every son of Nippon knows of the great artist," he said proudly.

"Well, he's sure a wonder. I've taken lessons from him for two years."

"I could see that you were well taught. You certainly caught me napping. The boss gave me no idea that you were an adept at our national sport."

"Guess somebody slipped up there," grinned Charlie.

Number Two smiled rather sourly. "Guess so. But now that you've demonstrated your skill, don't you think it's about time you untied me and handed back that gun?"

"Well, you've certainly got your nerve! What's the big idea?"

"The big idea is that all the trouble you've taken isn't going to do you one bit of good. You may not realize it, but I'm extremely uncomfortable trussed up like this, so be a good fellow and show some speed."

"Sorry you're uncomfortable, old chap, but the reply is, nothing doing!"

"Then it's nothing doing for both of us. What's more, young man, you're piling on the agony and storing up punishment for yourself."

"What in blazes are you driving at?"

"The boss won't stand for a breach of discipline like this; take it from me, he won't."

"Breach of discipline! Suffering snakes, that's a good one. Just because you're careless, I'm to be strafed, eh? I hate to hurt your feelings, Mr. Number Two, but you've certainly got your wires twisted. The boss will probably send you off to a nut factory and write me a letter of thanks for tying you up so you couldn't hurt yourself. Too bad I won't be with you when you meet him again. I'd certainly go to the bat for you and tell him you're just the sort of a kidnaper I've always hoped would kidnap me—that is, if fate decreed that I *should* be kidnaped!"

"Then," Number Two retorted, "your hopes are being fulfilled!"

"Do you believe in fairies?" was the polite rejoinder.

"No, but it's evident that you do. What's the sense of all this cockiness and bluff? You've tied me up, but you don't seem able to grasp the simple fact that the fate you laugh at has tied you to this car just as effectively. You can't leave it without my company to protect you from the bullets of those who follow us. Now laugh that one off, if you can, Mr. Smart American!"

"You mean, of course," said Charlie, "that the lights of the car behind us would pick me up before I could get off the road. Well, that may sound reasonable to you, but you see, old pal, they won't!"

"And how," asked Number Two, "do you propose to get away without being shot?"

"Well, I'll let you in on this, if you'll promise not to tell." Charlie dropped his voice to a mysterious whisper. "Santa Claus is coming with his sleigh and eight dear little reindeer to tote me off!"

Number Two suddenly lost his temper. "Cut it out, you silly fool!" he exploded. "You've done enough harm already, and if you keep it up you'll be a nasty looking piece of work when the boss gets through with you."

Charlie leaned over and tapped the angry gunman on the knee with his revolver. "Pipe down, bozo," he said affably. "What I intend to do is just nobody's business. Keep your hair on, you little palooka, and quit grouching or you're likely to get your picture in the papers along with the other dead heroes of the Japanese empire. I told you to pipe down a few minutes ago, so shut your ugly head and keep it shut unless you want me to put you out for good and all with the butt of this gun."

Having administered this rebuke, Charlie turned his attention to the window again and peered out at the blurred landscape. Swirling snowflakes and a jet black night obscured any extended view of the passing scene, but thanks to rays from lights of the car following he could make out something of the roadside. Here the snow was banked better than waist high where a snowplow had piled it earlier in the evening. Beyond the snowbanks he knew were the stone fences that line the roads in this part of New England, and now and again he caught sight of storm-buffed trees bending before the wind.

The speed of a car under such conditions is deceptive, especially when one is seated in the rear, but Charlie guessed that considering the weather and the snow-drifted roads they had done no more than thirty or thirty-five miles per hour and, at times, their progress must have been much slower than that. He did not envy their chauffeur his job, for despite chains, the car slewed and skidded like a drunken thing. It was not pleasant driving.

A glance at the luminous dial of his wristwatch showed him that the hands marked ten to eleven, so he turned again to the silent Jap at the other end of the seat.

"According to your reckoning, old groucho, we must be nearing home—wherever that is. I hate to bother you further, but this is where we exchange overcoats."

"You're the boss," Number Two returned resignedly. "I'm glad that you plan to swap—and not leave me without a coat



or a gun. I suppose you're going to make a dash for freedom in my fur coat on the chance that those behind us will take you for me?"

"Well, not exactly that," replied Charlie. "Though I'll admit I want your coat, both as a camouflage and to keep me warm."

"It's a cold, cold world outside," the Jap said. "And before you do anything you'll regret, please remember that even though you're lucky enough to fool those fellows behind us, it will be my duty to order the man at the wheel to use his gun just as soon as you leave the car."

"Why do you suggest that I gag you?" Charlie registered surprise. "That isn't playing the game as it's generally played. Is it, Mr. Kidnap-er? Giving pointers to the enemy, I mean."

"Let's say friendly enemies, Mr. Minor. I confess to losing my temper a while back and I apologize for it."

"Well, I've got to hand it to you," said Charlie, as he donned the raccoon coat and slipped his own over his late captor's shoulders, carefully buttoning it about him. "You're a sportsman, Number Two."

"At least I harbor no grudges. And I appreciate the way you handled me on that armhold. Nine out of ten fellows in your position would have broken my arm. Jiu jitsu, as you must know, was invented by our old Sumari, so that a warrior who had broken or lost his two swords could cope with an armed man. There's nothing gentle about that form of wrestling. The holds were invented to maim and kill. But I mustn't keep you—Better take my tip and gag me now. Otherwise—duty is duty. I'd much rather have a comeback at you later on than see a promising young wrestler shot down in cold blood and know I was the cause of it."

"Say, you're a swell guy," Charlie declared. "But just the same a gag won't be necessary. I've worked it out another way. Come over to Clarkville sometime when this is all over. We'll have a go at each other on the mat, and I'll show you round the swellest prep school in America!"

He broke off as the car skidded round a sharp turn and passing between high brick gate-posts, rolled smoothly up a well-cleared driveway under electric lamps that lighted their circuitous way through woods of spruce and hemlock heavy with snow.

"Does the chauffeur speak English?" Charlie asked suddenly.

Number Two nodded. "He certainly does. We were born within a block of each other out in Los Angeles."

"Thanks. This is where I start the dirty work." Charlie picked up the speaking tube. "Don't slow down," he ordered crisply. "Just open the window on your left and toss your gun into the drifts. Make it snappy if you care for your health. I've got a bead on the back of your neck. Things have been happening in here and your side-partner is bound hand and foot."

The car swerved as the man at the wheel snapped his head about and, finding himself looking into the muzzle of Charlie's gun, snapped it to the front again and let down the window beside him. Half a second later Charlie saw the chauffeur's revolver go hurtling through the open window and into a drift at the side of the drive.

"Keep to the middle of the road," he commanded through the tube. "Slow down now and stop. . . . Atta boy!" The car came to a standstill. "Kill your engine, then hop out on your side and take a look at the motor. I hope you're a good actor, for I want those fellows behind us to think you've run into trouble."

"Which he most certainly has," interrupted Number Two.

Charlie went on speaking into the tube. "Don't forget to make it realistic," he cautioned the chauffeur. "If you try to pull anything, I'll drill you. Now, beat it!"

The chauffeur opened the door, got out, and stumbling forward, raised the hood and started to tinker with the motor.

Charlie dropped the speaking tube and opened the door on the opposite side of the car.

"So long, pal," he whispered. "See you at Clarkville!"

Number Two grinned. "If you do get away, I'll say you deserve it."

Charlie missed this remarkable tribute from his erstwhile captor, for he had closed the door and with body bent to breast the wind, was moving toward the front of the car. Then like a shot he turned and dashed to the side of the road. He took

the banked-up snow in a flying leap and darted into the thick grove of evergreens.



# CHAPTER V

## UP A TREE

Floundering through the snowdrifts, sometimes waist high and again scarcely over his shoetops, Charlie zigzagged into the woods, directing his course away from the road. Only an occasional gleam from the electric lamps along the drive penetrated the dense gloom of the thicket and he was just able to force his way by inches through the interlacing branches of spruce and hemlock.

Even here, whirling gusts of dry snowflakes stung his face and he was whipped and torn by the wind-tossed firs. But as he staggered on he blessed the fury of the storm for he knew his tracks would soon be hidden by drifting snow.

Some fifty yards or so from the avenue, he came upon a clearing swept almost clean of snow by the storm. It was no part of Charlie's plan to lose himself in these woods with the mercury knocking the bottom out of the thermometer. Now that he had found what he was looking for, a spot where his trackers might be thrown off the trail, he stopped short and listened.

He could hear nothing but the dull roar of the wind through the evergreens. For a minute or so he stood there straining every nerve to catch some sound of pursuit. Then, realizing that less than five minutes had elapsed since his dash from the car and that in all probability the Japs, expecting easy trailing in the snow, had not yet taken up the chase, he made a sudden plan.

With Charlie Minor, decision was invariably followed by prompt action, and now he sprinted back over his own tracks, already half wiped out by swirling snow. The going was much easier in this direction, for now he no longer faced the biting wind and from the roadway beyond a dim glow filtered through the trees.

Presently his return journey led him beneath a tall hemlock which grew just behind the first line of trees that bordered the drive. Charlie reached up and catching hold of an overhanging limb, swung himself into the tree. Most evergreens are easy to climb and although the bulky fur coat was somewhat of a hindrance, he eventually mounted to a point where he could gain a comparatively unobstructed view of the driveway through the top branches of the smaller trees that grew between his own hemlock and the road. Sheltering himself as best he might behind the trunk, Charlie peered down at the scene before him.

In the lighted roadway, banked high with snow, lay the six big cars that had brought him and his teammates into the stormy wilderness. Several men were standing beside the leading car from which he had escaped a few minutes before. Charlie easily recognized Number Two by means of his own ulster which was far too big for the little Jap and trailed inches on the ground when he moved. He thought he spotted his late chauffeur, too, who, with three other Japs, made up the party. It was evident that all five were holding a heated argument.

Charlie noticed that throughout the discussion Number Two kept stamping his feet and threshing his arms, and therefore concluded that pursuit had been delayed while the others released their comrade from his bonds and listened to the account of his own escape.

Then as he watched from his precariously swaying perch, it became plainly apparent from the gestures of the disputants that not one of them was keen upon following him into the woods. One man, who he guessed was the boss of the show, kept motioning toward the trees and obviously swearing fluently in Japanese. Number Two demonstrated that he walked with extreme difficulty, while the expressive pantomime of the other three showed more plainly than words that they flatly refused to do their master's bidding.

Charlie was astonished at this flagrant disobedience of the gang leader's commands until he began to suspect that Number Two might be at the bottom of it. He remembered that his companion in the car had showed signs of being distinctly friendly, that he bore no grudge for having lost control of the situation and the subsequent discomfort it had brought him. He recalled, too, that the Jap, born in Los Angeles, had wished him luck at parting! He had even as good as said that since Charlie had used his brains and brawn to start a getaway, he hoped the escape would be made good. Charlie chuckled to himself as he fancied the little man telling them that they had a desperate person to deal with; a lad who would do anything rather than be caught; who would, in all likelihood, shoot on sight. There was no mistaking that the gunmen did not relish the prospect of adventure in the storm-swept woods under such conditions, particularly as the fellow they sought would hold all the odds.

Charlie found this byplay as entertaining as a movie. It soon became apparent that the Japs were making their refusal definite, and telling Number One that if he wanted to recapture the fugitive he could go in and get him without their help. There followed what seemed like an extraordinary burst of indignant vituperation from the leader, and then Number One strode to the edge of the road and vanished among the trees.

A moment later Charlie saw the Jap hurry beneath him and as the man disappeared for the second time he chuckled to himself and settled back comfortably on his branch. Number One would not go far along the all but obliterated trail that came to so mysterious an end in the clearing. . . . Old Horse Feathers would be back again presently, minus, his quarry and angrier than ever! Charlie wondered what the kidnapers would do then.

So far the entire adventure appealed to him mightily. Of course the championship game was shot for the present, and such contests were not an everyday occurrence. Still, to be one of the victims of a large-scale kidnaping was a decidedly novel experience, and Charlie was thoroughly enjoying it. True, the weather was a bit on the cold side and not so pleasant. . . . A thick porterhouse steak with onions and French-fried potatoes would be all to the merry just at the moment, especially if accompanied by about a gallon of red-hot coffee. . . . Or even half a dozen sandwiches, and a slab of cheese with apple pie would be more than acceptable. Charlie's appetite was always excellent, at any hour of the day or night; and it was not at all impaired by the five-hour interlude since his last meal, which had perforce been a light one. He began to wonder why the heroes of adventure tales he had read were never hungry—or never seemed to be—and came to the conclusion that such stories were the bunk, and nothing like real-life adventure. He knew the other fellows in the cars must be hungry too, and he wondered whether they'd be given a hand-out where they were going.

The more he thought about food, the hungrier he got and the hungrier he got the more he questioned his wisdom in leaving the car and possibly missing the chance of a midnight meal. Just the same, there was another side to the story. If this kidnaping was a matter of being held for ransom and the money was not forthcoming; if the pursuit became too hot; or, if for some reason the kidnapers lost their nerve, as sometimes happened—then the victims could expect to suffer considerably more hardship than the loss of a meal.

As Charlie's thoughts took this turn, he began to puzzle over the motive for it all—why he and his teammates had been snatched away between halves of the basketball game. He knew that Shorty Fiske's father was many times a millionaire. Logical enough, shanghaiing the heir to the Fiske millions—but why the rest of them? Neither his nor Monk's nor Zip's people were more than comfortably well off, and Bull Brown's tuition at Clarkville School was paid by a scholarship. No . . . except for Shorty, none of them was a likely candidate for kidnaping. It was certainly queer that all five of them should be spirited out of the State College Gym at the same time. Surely it could have nothing to do with the basketball tournament? Where did the Japs come in? Such things might happen in books but Charlie couldn't see them being pulled off in real life. Ridgetown High had a good enough team to win her basketball battles without resorting to such crudities. And anyway, how could that bunch of factory town husks get hold of the money necessary to shuffle a deal like this? Japanese gunmen who speak good colloquial American and are adepts at jiu jitsu are not picked up for a song—or any song and dance that Ridgetown could cough up. Somebody was spending big money to put this over to-night. Why it was being done, Charlie couldn't fathom. But he was soundly convinced that neither Number One of the Horse Feathers troupe, nor the Shooting Stars were back of it.

Now the group in the roadway seemed to be getting nervous or impatient or both. Their leader had not yet returned and Charlie could tell from their excited gestures that they were becoming apprehensive for Number One's safety. Some of the other members of the gang opened the car windows and joined in the general discussion.

Charlie himself began to worry about the little man. What if Old Horse Feathers took it upon himself to get lost in these woods? He couldn't wander about in this storm all night without freezing to death. Why couldn't he follow the perfectly good trail that had been made for him and when it came to an end retrace his steps like a sensible kidnaper? By this time he ought to be back on the drive giving his men what-for, instead of chasing a basketball player the length and breadth of evergreen woods, and losing himself in the bargain!

Charlie had no logical reason to be concerned for the welfare of this energetic bandit, Number One. On the other hand, the Jap, if he really had got into difficulty, was in it because of Charlie Minor. The Captain of Clarkville's team wondered if that made him responsible, and the more he thought about it, the more certain he became that it did. Anyway, he decided that it would be considerably warmer chasing a kidnaper who was supposed to be chasing him, than continuing to sit in this windy perch.

With the idea that he'd better start moving, Charlie turned his gaze from the men gathered on the driveway to the drifts beneath his hemlock, where he meant to come down. And had not his leg been partially wound round the trunk he would

surely have tumbled headfirst in surprise. At the base of the tree stood the man who was lost. Number One, revolver in hand, was staring straight up at him.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE AUTO TRUNK

Charlie gave up. If it came to shooting, Number One could pick him off like a roosting fowl before he could drag the automatic out of the pocket of the fur overcoat he was wearing.

Then suddenly he realized that the Jap, although looking straight at him, was totally unaware that he was hidden up the tree. Charlie pressed his body against the hemlock's thick trunk and thanked his stars for the dark night and the heavy foliage that concealed him. Finally, after carefully scrutinizing young Minor's tree and the one next to it, Number One raised a whistle to his lips and blew two sharp blasts.

Almost directly there was a snapping and crackling of branches below and Number Two appeared from the drive, followed by three of the gang. The leader at once commenced to speak in a language that Charlie supposed was Japanese, but his harangue was interrupted by one of his henchmen.

"Speak American, can't you! That is, if you want me to follow orders, Boss."

"If I had my way, Adatchi," Number One spoke English now and his tone was full of contempt, "your father and mother would be given a hundred strokes of the bastinado apiece—and that would be but a preliminary punishment."

"How come, Boss?" The man seemed astounded at his chief's outburst.

"It is a serious crime to rear a subject of the Sacred and Inviolable Emperor Hirohito to speak only this tongue of the barbarous Occident. Death would be small atonement—"

"Oh, lay off the old folks, Boss. I was born in Brooklyn. Whaddya think I'd do in the Docks Gang I hung out wit' when I was a kid, speakin' nothin' but Jap? Where'd I be now, eh? Why, I'm an American citizen—or was until I did that five-year stretch up the river—"

"Say, you two can argue!" Number Two interrupted them. "Let me remind you it's sorta chilly standing round here. Cut the chatter, shall we? And get down to business. Any sign of young Minor, Boss?"

"You, Number Two, are overstepping the line, I should say," the head of the gang retorted. "Let *me* remind you that I'm running this show!"

"Okay on that, Boss. But what's the dope on this basketball player?" Number Two persisted.

The chief shrugged. "I regret to say that he has disappeared. His trail seems to end in an open spot swept clean by the wind and it could not be picked up again in this gloom."

"Don't you pack a flashlight?" asked the man called Adatchi.

"I do, but I am not using it while trailing young Minor. He's armed with a perfectly good rod, remember. He's also desperate, and won't hesitate to use it."

"No, indeed," said Number Two. "After what he did to me in the car, I wouldn't put a little thing like that past him. But we can't stand here all night—what—"

"Silence!" hissed the leader. "If you'll hold your tongue, I'll finish what I have to say. I followed his trail in the snow over again to this spot near where he entered these woods from the driveway. I believe he has taken to the trees, but I must admit I haven't been able to spot him. When I whistled for you I intended to have you men scatter through the woods along the drive to search for him. But the storm is growing worse every minute—I'm afraid we're only wasting time."

"It's a cinch he won't get far," said Adatchi. "Both entrances are well guarded—and if he does reach the wall he'll never get over it—not with those pretty trimmin's of broken glass and iron spikes to catch him. Let's beat it up to the house, now, Boss. We won't have any trouble pickin' him up somewhere on the estate to-morrow morning."

"It is the only thing we can do. But you know what we'll be in for up there. Orders were to bring the five, you know—"

"And we're one shy," cut in Number Two. "I'll bet a certain person will raise the roof all right—but we'll live through that. On the other hand, I'm afraid young Minor will freeze to death. This is no night for camping out."

"What can we do about it?" demanded the chief of the band.

Number Two shrugged. "The Big Fella up at the house will probably order us to keep on the hunt. But he can count me out. If Minor or whatever his name is is smart enough to get away, he ought to be smart enough to know that he won't last long outdoors to-night. There's shelter waiting for him at the end of the drive, and he knows it. Let him go to it, then. I'm not goin' out again, once I get under cover from this storm."

"No, you are right. We won't go out again," spoke up the fifth man.

Number One swung about. "Go to the cars immediately," he ordered. "And let me warn you, Adatchi, and you"—he pointed a stern forefinger at Number Two—"watch your tongues and obey—or you'll run into something worse than bad weather."

He strode forward over the snowbank into the drive, followed by the others.

Charlie blessed Adatchi for knowing no Japanese. The men were forced to shout to make themselves heard above the storm, and the wind had lifted their voices within easy earshot of Charlie's hemlock branch. Now he did some quick thinking.

The Japs had no more than gained the roadway than he was down the tree and after them. Crouching in a drift beneath overhanging branches near the drive, he saw them enter the waiting cars, and slowly the procession began to move along the snowy avenue.

From the conversation he had overheard, he realized that as soon as they reached the house, a guard would be thrown around the place. Those chaps would be looking for him to turn up there, for they had stated no more than the truth when they said that to remain out in this blizzard would mean freezing to death. Of course he might try the wall they had spoken of, but the broken glass that topped it didn't sound so good—and even if he did get over, the chances were he'd be miles from any refuge. He was stiff and numb with cold already, and the prospect of a long tramp through the storm was in no way alluring. Therefore he took the one and only alternative. As the sixth and last car in the line rolled slowly past, he dashed from his hiding place and streaked after it.

The car was still doing something under ten miles an hour when Charlie swung on behind. Just forward of the rear bumper was a large and handsome auto trunk. He sprang onto the bumper bar and was hanging onto the trunk when a sudden idea struck him. He tried the metal clasps that secured the lid. The trunk was not locked! It took but a split second to open it. He thanked heaven that the thing was empty and better still, there was plenty of room inside. So into the trunk popped Charlie, doubling his long legs beneath him. The lid dropped—and rested upon the metal catches which had been turned inside. To all outward appearances the trunk was closed—and it was closed—to advantage—with an air-vent and a look-see for Captain Charlie Minor!

The car gained speed but the drive was much smoother than the rutted highway and though Charlie was scarcely comfortable, he no longer felt the stinging bite of the blizzard nor the icy whip of the wind; and this went a long way to compensate for sitting doubled over on his knees with his head twisted sideways. He'd been in some queer places within the last few hours and he wondered where he'd land next. He had no plan or purpose save that of learning where the rest of the team were headed for and to do his best in an attempt to set them free.

But so far the circumstances had hardly been favorable to setting up any definite scheme. Charlie knew that he was being carried to the same destination as his friends, and at the moment he was a whole lot further from freezing, inside this auto trunk, than he had been when perched between icy earth and storm-swept sky. And for the moment, that was enough for him. Why worry? When the time came for action, well and good. He was on his way and he'd let the future, however hazardous, take care of itself.

After five or six minutes more, the car came to a stop. Charlie cautiously slanted a look at the landscape. He could not see the house, but the trees had given place to broad expanses of undulating snow-fields dotted here and there with huge mounds of shrubby like shapeless snowmen, garmented with dark patches of burlap, and he knew that this must be the end of the journey.

Then he heard the car door slam, and the sound of voices was carried to him on the wind. The kidnapers and kidnaped had arrived—and with them an unsuspected passenger. Charlie grinned wickedly and kept eyes and ears as close to the narrow opening as he could get them.

And again his conveyance moved slowly forward. He caught a glimpse of the broad facade of a large country house and a group of coated figures, heads bent against the wind, hurrying up stone steps of a terrace to the yellow block of the open entrance door. Then his car swung round the side of the house, stopped for a second or two and presently rolled

into a lighted garage. As they entered the building, Charlie lowered the trunk lid so that no more than a glimmer of light showed through the crack. This was neither the time nor the place to take risks just to satisfy curiosity, so Captain Minor held his breath and lay low.

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## CHAPTER VII

### THE BIG FELLA

Although he could see nothing of his present surroundings, he could hear a number of men talking close at hand. Here, the roar and rush of the blizzard was shut out and the voices were clear and distinct in Charlie's ears. Unfortunately, however, the words were spoken in Japanese and meant less than nothing to him. Then he heard the garage doors close, the voices grew fainter and died away altogether; a door slammed a long way off and the light disappeared.

Charlie cautiously raised the trunk lid. The garage, as he guessed, was pitch dark—not with the darkness of outdoors where the snow provided a pale glimmer that made it possible to distinguish objects a few yards distant—but black as a lake of black ink.

Feeling very stiff and very cold, Captain Minor slowly and painfully lifted his long form over the edge of the trunk. Then he stretched his cramped limbs and climbed out of his hiding place. When his feet rested firmly on the concrete floor, he made his way along the side of the car to the driver's seat. He opened the door and switched on the light of the instrument board. In another second he had the seat up, the tool kit open, and finally found what he needed—a flash light. He snapped off the light on the dash and got out of the car, carefully closing the door behind him.

Shrouded in darkness, he stood listening for a moment or two, but there was no sound except the whine of the wind round the building. Satisfied that all was clear he snapped on the flash and took his bearings. The garage was a large one. There were a number of cars parked there—fourteen in all, he counted. At first he thought of attempting an escape in one of the cars, then he remembered the lodge gates at the entrance to the drive. Of course they would be shut. No chance, there. Keeping his flash pointed near the floor, he sent its rays traveling over the walls and at last he held it focused on the open entrance to a passageway. Regulating the light to the merest glow, Charlie made for this exit.

The passage ended in a closed door about fifty feet from the garage, and Charlie surmised that this covered way led direct to the main house. Ridding himself of the fur coat, he tossed it into the back seat of the nearest car and went down the passage. At the door he turned off his flash and slowly tried the handle. The lock gave and after a quick reconnoiter, he slipped through and shut the door behind him.

He found himself in a small square hall, dimly lighted. There were closed doors in all four walls and two open exits, the first a narrow stair on the right, leading to an upper story; the second, a corridor on the left, lit by a single electric bulb. Listening outside one door after another, he heard voices within each room. And from behind the panels of the last door came the clink of cutlery and china. He decided that this back hall formed part of the servants' quarters. Obviously the abductors of the team were partaking of a late supper, and judging from the bursts of laughter and animated conversation within the room, Charlie knew they were enjoying it. He shook his fist at the closed door. Making merry over food and drink while he and their other victims went hungry—the dirty rats!

Then, since he had no desire to stay anywhere near his late captors, he started up the staircase to investigate the upper regions and to find some way of locating the other fellows of the team. Suddenly he heard some one talking above, and the sound of footsteps at the head of the stair. He turned like a flash and dove for the lighted corridor at the other end of the hall.

There was no time for caution now, and feeling himself beset by pitfalls on every side, he sped along till he reached the lone electric light blazing on its wall socket. Switching off the bulb, he brought his flash out of his pocket to guide him, and finally reached a short flight of steps. He ran lightly to the top and turned into another passage, where soft lights showed him that he was on a sort of mezzanine between the ground floor and upper story. At last he came to a door that stood ajar. He peered inside a brightly lighted room and found it empty.

Then again he heard voices behind him. He realized that the men who had descended the servants' staircase were approaching through the passage that led him here. Without a moment's hesitation he slipped into the lighted room and swiftly pushed the door to; and his advance into the room was noiseless for his feet sank into the deep pile of a thick rug. Three windows cut the expanse of the right hand wall, and heavy brown velvet draperies hung to the floor, shutting out the night. Glass-doored bookcases between the windows were filled with legal-looking leather-bound volumes, and near the center of the large room stood a huge mahogany writing table scattered with books and papers. A door opposite the windows stood partly open and beyond it Charlie could hear some one moving about.

For a moment more he stood motionless. Then, just outside the door to the hall from which he had come, some one

sneezed. And he heard a man say, from the inner room, "It's time they were here. I'm going in the study."

Caught between two fires, Charlie waited no longer, but darted to the nearest window and went to cover behind the voluminous hangings. He was now in a perfect hiding place, for the bay of the rounded window formed a small alcove and there was plenty of room for him to conceal himself without danger of discovery. The window glass was thickly crusted with snow and it was impossible to see out. This he knew would also make him safe from the eyes of watchers out of doors. Sinking to the floor, he arranged the curtains so as to get a narrow view of the table-desk and its armchair.

A rather breathless Charlie was no more than comfortably settled at this observation point when he heard the door to the hall open and shut and two men walked into his line of vision.

"Ah, my old friends, Numbers One and Two," he said eagerly to himself—"now for it, eh?"

Then footsteps approached from the inner room. "Good evening, men," said a vibrant bass voice. "Everything went off as planned, I trust?"

That voice, deep and mellow, caused Charlie to expect a tall, broad-shouldered man of middle age, but the person who appeared behind the desk was a striking antithesis of his surmise. The man was chubby, round-faced—a dwarf, not more than four feet in height. The rosy tinge of his undershot visage beneath a cap of curly black hair was the only warm thing about this small man. The black eyes were hard and sharp as steel gimlets, and his short upper lip gave his expression, even when his face was in repose, the appearance of a continual and sardonic grin.

"Well, how about it?" he went on with considerable energy. "*Have* you obeyed orders? Are the members of that basketball team here?"

Number Two remained standing at attention, nor did his expression of Oriental calm change even for an instant. Number One did not control himself so well. Gone was the jaunty air of assurance that Charlie had remarked in the Gym. The Jap was plainly nervous; he shuffled his feet on the thick rug and after starting to speak, gulped, coughed and sneezed violently.

Charlie wondered what manner of man this low-browed dwarf might be that he could scare the daylights out of a hard-boiled gangster-kidnaper! The man at the desk kept staring at Number One with the unchanging, diabolical grin, but slowly the low forehead furrowed and sharp lines appeared between the boring eyes.

"So!" he said suddenly, "you have failed. The one thing I do not tolerate." His sonorous voice struck an even deeper note. "Your life for failure, you know. It is eleven-thirty now. According to custom, you will have one hour wherein to prepare—and then, my friend, I shall take pleasure in sending you to the only place where failure—or success—mean nothing."

He chuckled and a chill crept down Charlie's spine. The monster sat like a smiling block of flint and Number One paled under his yellow skin. At last the Jap seemed to pull himself together. "I have not failed," he said stolidly, evidently making a strong attempt to throw off the almost hypnotic influence this dwarf held over him.

"Then the five players are safely housed in the rooms made ready for them?"

"Four—four of them are, Mr. Watson."

"Only four! It takes five to make a team—and if you recall, my orders stated that the Clarkville *team* was to be brought here."

"I remember your orders perfectly." Number One was finding his self-confidence again. "We brought the five young men you specified away with us. One of them, I regret to say, escaped from the car, after we had entered your grounds."

Mr. Watson tapped the desk gently with his fingers. "The young man's name?"

"Charles Hadley Minor."

"So—the captain of the team." He shot a look at Number Two. "I suppose we have *you* to thank for his getaway?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course you are responsible, Number One. But how did it happen? Explain the matter yourself, Number Two."

The little Jap flushed fiery red. "The young gentleman jiu jitsu'd me, honorable sir."

"The deuce he did!" Mr. Watson laughed deep in his throat. "Charles Minor must be a young man of promise. To beat a

Jap at his own national sport is a feat worth talking about. And you had him covered, of course?"

"Yes, sir. But he was too quick for me. The young gentleman informed me later that he had studied under Nugochi."

"Ah! That probably accounts for his proficiency in the manly art. He must be an excellent athlete, for you are no tyro. Luckily, the responsibility, according to our contract, lies with the leader. If within the hour Number One has not succeeded in locating this young man and putting him securely under lock and key, the leadership of your organization will be vacant. You are next in line for promotion, Number Two. The job is yours if you want it, and with the usual large increase in salary."

"That—that means I become Number One for a year?"

"Exactly. At the end of that time you may carry on for another twelve months or resign and be escorted out of the country,—as you wish."

"And if I do not choose to take the risk of being put on the spot for failure of an undertaking?"

"Then you can either remain in your present position or resign. If the latter case, I will give you a month's wages and see that you take the first steamer for any European port you care to name. You will, of course, be fined five hundred dollars for your carelessness, no matter how you decide."

"Half a grand!" exclaimed Number Two.

"As per your contract," his master returned calmly.

"Oh, very well, then. I agree," said the Jap. "But if it's all the same to you, sir, I will not make my decision until the position is vacant."

"And it's not vacant yet," declared Number One with some show of spirit. "An hour is hardly time enough to comb the woods, Mr. Watson. That young fellow is bound to come up to the house. He's proved he's no fool and capture is one up on freezing to death, any night."

"Or being punctured by a lead bullet," Mr. Watson added.

Number One shivered. "Now that you have spoken, sir, I shall not leave it to chance. But neither you nor I nor any one else can make the men face that blizzard again before they have had a hot meal and a rest. My life is forfeit if I do not find young Minor. But no one can be expected to accomplish the impossible."

"Very well, then," said his employer. "I give you until daybreak to find Minor or suffer the consequences. Cut along now, both of you—and see that you make good this time."

He waited until the men had left the room. Then he twisted his short, chubby body round in his chair.

"Ask Miss Lee to be good enough to come to me," he called to some one Charlie could not see.

"I shall fetch her at once, myself, sir." The voice came from the room beyond.

"Do it on the jump, then," the dwarf retorted. Pulling a huge cigar out of a waistcoat pocket, he bit off the end, lit the weed and leaning back in his chair, puffed contentedly.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### MISS LEE

Charlie closed the small gap between the curtains. He was cramped and dizzy from bending over with his head so near the floor, and now he leaned back against the wall below the window sill and thought about what he had heard.

He wondered how this Miss Lee came into the picture. Watson seemed to be the owner of the house and estate and he was, without doubt, the big boss mentioned by Number Two in the car. Then he remembered that Number One had spoken of him as the "big fella" and he grinned. Ironic title, all right! But this dwarf was the man in back of the kidnaping and from what Charlie had just seen, he knew that he was a dangerous antagonist. Evidently a man of means and some brains, he was as cold-blooded and cruel as a Chicago gang leader.

But cruel or not, the man must have some object other than ransom in this kidnaping. Somehow or other, Charlie couldn't quite resign himself to the idea that this Watson was a professional gang leader or particularly in need of money. Only a man of means could maintain an estate of this size, and a suite of trained desperadoes in the bargain. Why did Watson employ a dozen men who could be called on to undertake as dangerous a program as the stunt they had worked in the State College Gym that evening? It was too much of a puzzle. Charlie gave it up.

For the first time since this adventure began he realized that he was tired. The warmth of the room, after the bitter outdoors, made him drowsy. There was space to lie down in this alcove, if he turned sideways and doubled up his legs. . . He could listen to further developments much more comfortably that way. Taking pains not to disturb the draperies he twisted round and pillowed his head on his right arm. Except for the scratching of a pen on paper, no sound came from the room. Then even that intermittent scratching stopped. Charlie closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them with an effort. He must not sleep. Such a thing was unthinkable—He must find the fellows just as soon as—It wouldn't hurt to shut his eyes—could think just as well—Who was Miss Lee? A Japanese dwarf, like—Did she play Japanese basketball? She—Charlie sank into deep and dreamless slumber.

He awoke with a guilty start and sat up, carefully stifling a prodigious yawn. Watson was speaking on the other side of the curtains, and Charlie, now suddenly wide awake, cautiously made a peephole as he had done before.

The dwarf was perched on the end of the table, swinging his short legs. Charlie could see no one else, though Watson was evidently addressing some one.

"And so," he was saying, and now his resonant voice had lost its malignance and was full of charm, "and so, my dear, you have kept me waiting again." He looked at the watch on his wrist and Charlie was struck again by the incongruity of the virile tones issuing from so bizarre-looking a mannikin. "Forty-five minutes to be exact. Not really a loverlike thing for a bride to do. Although please do not think that the groom is cross about it."

"I am not your bride yet, Mr. Watson."

For some reason that Charlie could not understand this voice made his heart jump.

"No, no, my dear. But to-morrow at ten o'clock the parson is due to arrive and I hope," he added, "that you will be more prompt than you were to-night. It might be unlucky for the bride to be late, you know."

"No more unlucky," thought Charlie, "than being tied up to that little monster."

"I'm sorry I had to keep you waiting," the girl's voice answered. "But I was in bed and had to get dressed. You suggested that I go to bed right after dinner, on account of your plans for midnight."

"So I did, so I did. Well, I apologize, my dear. A lover's impatience, you understand. You are so cold and standoffish! It makes me frantic at times."

"You know that I don't love you, Mr. Watson."

"Please don't call me Mr. Watson. My name is Walter—Wally is what my intimates call me—and *you* might call me Wally, Dear."

Charlie choked silently.

"After to-morrow I'll think about it," said the girl. "In the meantime you might let me know why I was called down here. First I was told that the game was off, and just when I'd fallen asleep again your secretary knocked on my door to say that

you must see me at once. What is so important that I have to be awakened in the middle of the night to hear it?"

"One of the team escaped my men."

There was a slight pause. Then she asked: "Which one?"

"The captain—Charles Minor."

"Oh—yes?"

"He's in the grounds somewhere. My men will find him, never fear. But I've been thinking things over. This is a risky business, my dear."

"So you've declared it off!" Charlie was surprised at the petulance in her soft voice. "Well, all I can say is, no game—no wedding!"

Her last words surprised the listener behind the curtains even more. He strained his ears to catch Watson's reply.

"If I thought you really meant that, I'd strangle you where you sit!" The dwarf's voice rasped like a rusty file now.

"But, what do you expect, Wally—Wally, dear?" The girl's tones were honey sweet and Charlie suddenly hated her.

"What do you mean?"

"You offered me anything I wanted for a wedding present, didn't you? And now you're welshing. You pretend to be so fond of me and yet you refuse me the one thing I want."

The dwarf crossed his short legs and leaned forward. Charlie saw that his eyes fairly glinted.

"Why did you ask this thing of me?" he said sharply.

"Why not?"

"You could have had jewels, a trip around the world, a honeymoon castle in Spain or anywhere you pleased—anything and everything most girls spend their lives wishing for! Yet, instead, you insist I bring this team up here. I smell a rat, young lady. What are these young men to you?"

The girl laughed, a silvery, bell-like sound. "Why, nothing at all, Wally. Why are you so suspicious all of a sudden?"

"Oh, I know you're a basketball fan! But the request you made of me is a strange one, nevertheless."

"I don't see why you think so. You are always telling me how much you love me—how much you'd do for me. Perhaps I wanted to test you. You told me you could do *anything*—and I believed you."

"You little witch!" Watson was beaming. "That is the reason, is it? Well, my dear, I *will* prove to you that I can do anything—give you anything you ask for—that I am supreme—an uncrowned emperor!"

The little man dropped off the table-desk and strutted up and down, gesticulating violently. "And my men will find young Minor—even if they have to dig out the woods with shovels."

"Splendid!" approved the girl. "But then, if the Japs are to be up all night, the 'big doings' won't take place until sometime to-morrow, after all."

Mr. Watson stopped short in his stride. "Why, that's so. I guess the game had better be postponed until to-morrow afternoon."

"Yes. And the wedding until to-morrow evening?"

"You aren't trying to back out of it!" The dwarf's voice was savage, his eyes flashing fire.

"Oh, dear me, no!" Her answer was prompt and cool. "You are the most suspicious person I've ever met, Wally. It's simply a matter of principle with me, you know. I asked for this game and you told me you could arrange it. I know you're a superman, but I want you to have the chance to prove it to me."

"Well, don't you think carrying off the team under the eyes of thousands was a masterpiece of strategy?"

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed it was!"

"Ah!" Friend Wally was all beaming smiles. "That's the way I like to hear you talk."

"I hope," she said, "you have the other members of the team safely under lock and key?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. They've been taken to the north wing, where each fellow has a separate room—"

"And nice strong iron bars on the windows?" she insisted.

"Yes, yes! Those birds won't fly away. But"—his tone softened to one of pleading, "won't you change your mind about postponing the marriage ceremony?"

"Until after the game, you mean?"

As Walter Watson was about to speak there came a knock on the door leading to the hall.

"Excuse me, my dear," he said, "this must be important—they wouldn't dare interrupt me otherwise.—No, don't go! I'll attend to whatever it is and then we can go on with our talk.—Come in!"

Number Two appeared on the threshold.

"Your pardon, honorable sir,—honorable miss!" The Jap bowed low.

"Yes, what is it?" his master questioned brusquely.

"Sir, the honorable Number One sends me to impart following information—"

"Cut the formality, boy, get on with the story. What's the trouble?"

Number Two took a couple of steps into the room and bowed again.

"Number One requests me to inform you, sir, that with the exception of my insignificant self, the men refuse to obey him."

"You mean they won't go out in the storm?" Watson's expression became more sardonic than ever, his yellow teeth bared menacingly.

"That is so, sir. They say that the wind and snow are on the increase, that the mercury is continuing to fall. It is sure death, they insist, to go tramping over length and breadth of your estate to-night. And a fool's errand, as well, since a search in the blinding snow and darkness would lead to nothing. If Mister Charlie Minor wishes to stay out in the blizzard, let him take care of himself, they say. Then they have also spoken words that are not fit for ears of young lady."

"Oh, they have, have they?"

"Yes, honorable sir. And Number One desires your presence in the servants' hall, if you will be kind enough to find it convenient."

"Well, I do not find it convenient," snarled the angry dwarf. "This is mutiny!"

"So Number One begs to inform you, sir."

"That's his business—that's what I pay him for—to manage these cattle. You may inform him from me that he'll go out like a light when day breaks if those men don't bring Minor into this house."

"Oh, but Wally!" the girl broke in. "Wally, *dear*! That's too much, you know. I don't want to be the cause of your head man's death—or of the basketball player's, either. That would spoil everything."

"Well—what do *you* suggest?"

"Why, I think that you should go down and talk to them—your presence and your—eloquence, Wally—will put it over, I know. I want the game, not a couple of dead men, for a wedding present."

"I believe you are right!" Watson's tone was full of conceit. "My force of character will compel them to go. Wait here, my dear. A matter of five minutes, not more, and I will be with you again.—Come along, Number Two. I'll show you how these dogs can be whipped into reason."

He stalked past the Jap and out of the room. But before Number Two followed his master, he stooped to fumble with his shoelace—and in that instant, he slipped a small automatic from his pocket and dropped it noiselessly upon the rug. Then swiftly he rose and hurried on the heels of the dwarf without a backward glance.

Charlie had not recovered from his astonishment, when the girl sprang into view. With one quick swooping motion, she snatched up the gun and concealed it inside the blouse of her tweed dress. As she leaned back against the desk, facing Charlie's hiding place, he saw that she was very pretty, tall and slender, probably not more than sixteen years old, he

judged. For a long moment she stood there, gripping the desk top with her slim fingers, staring straight before her—and also straight at Charlie's hiding place. He was scarcely able to breathe with excitement—he felt she *must* know that some one was behind the curtain. . . . Then suddenly her pale face beneath the waves of soft brown hair lost its composure and she broke into a storm of weeping.

This was too much for Charlie Minor. He sprang to his feet, swept the draperies aside and walked out of the window alcove.

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# CHAPTER IX

## THE BIG IDEA

As the window curtains swung to behind him, Charlie's footsteps were deadened by the thick rug, and he saw now that the girl's eyes were closed and that she was still unaware of his presence. He stood still, then, waiting for her to discover him, fearing that a sudden move on his part might frighten her into betraying them both to the occupants of the household.

In spite of her pallor and the expression of melancholy, her features were exceedingly appealing and her slight figure was full of grace. The brown tweed dress was modish and well-cut, a green silk scarf knotted about her throat matched the leather belt that defined her waist. Beige woolen stockings and sensible brogues, noted Charlie, completed the ensemble. As he stared at her, the thought crossed his mind that she hardly looked the part of a designing creature who planned to marry a monster for his money! Something queer here—but then, he *had* heard with his own ears the flattery and cajolery she had used to trick this dwarf—she'd marry him, all right—and then—

The girl uttered a long sigh, opened her eyes—and shrank back in alarm. "Where did you come from?" she whispered and her hand reached for the revolver inside her blouse.

Charlie motioned toward the alcove. "Back of those curtains."

"Then you overheard—?"

"Sorry, Miss Lee. I was an unwilling eavesdropper."

Her eyes were still widely intent on his. "It—doesn't matter." She slipped the gun back into concealment. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

Charlie grinned. "The name is Minor, Miss Lee. Charles Hadley Minor, to be exact." And as she uttered a low exclamation, he said, "Ah, I see you have heard it before. Well, I didn't drop in to interrupt any love passages between you and your fiancé, nor to spy upon you at all."

The girl flushed and a look of relief spread over her features. "So you're the missing basketball captain!"

"Guilty on the first count."

"And you—you came in here to find the other kidnaped players?"

"I did. By way of the garage, you see. But I certainly can't explain why I walked out of my perfectly good hidey-hole just now."

She looked at him for a moment without speaking, then she nodded wisely. "You saw me crying and felt sorry for me."

He started indignantly. "Why do you say that! I—"

"But I know that's it."

"Oh, you do, eh? Well, now I realize what a fool thing I did."

The corners of her mouth twitched and Charlie turned red. "I don't quite see—"

He broke in hurriedly, "Snap judgment—poor, as usual."

"Yes?" Her voice was cool and inquiring.

"I mean—well—beauty in distress and all that kind of thing—made me forget you're engaged to this Watson guy—that the kind of person you are wouldn't hesitate to give me up. In other words, *you* don't need sympathy—and *I* get it in the neck!"

"But—but I *do* need—I need more than sympathy, Mr. Minor—I need your help!" She took a step forward.

Charlie stared at her doubtfully. "You do?"

"And I'm so—so *terribly* glad you got away from them. It gives me a chance for—for life!"

"Oh, yeah? I'm afraid I'm more than ordinarily dumb to-night, Miss Lee. I just don't get you. Somehow we seem to be talking in circles."



"Listen to me." She paused and glanced fearfully over her shoulder. "You saw me pick up that gun?"

"Yes, of course."

"The Jap—Number Two—planned to drop a note from the car on the way up here—messages to guide the pursuit, you know. But he couldn't do it—it wouldn't work, I guess, in this storm, anyway."

"No, hardly." Charlie thought a minute, then he laughed. "As a matter of fact, I put him out of the running without ever suspecting that he had a plan to stage a rescue. Jiu jitsu'd him and tied him up in the car. Wonder why he didn't put me wise then?"

She shrugged. "I suppose he thought the plan wouldn't be any good in the blizzard, and his Oriental fatalism came to the fore."

"But why the automatic?"

"His sign to me that there was no hope, that he was too closely watched to be of further help to me."

"Say," exclaimed Charlie, "let me get this straight, please. I'm dumb as blazes, of course, but from what I got out of your talk with friend Wally"—he grinned pityingly as the girl shuddered—"it seemed to me that *you'd* planned this kidnaping. At least you practically forced your fiancé into it."

"Yes, I did—but I *wish* you wouldn't call him my fiancé!"

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "Everything's set for the wedding to-morrow morning, I understand?"

"Y-yes—but you see—"

"No, I don't, Miss Lee. I don't see any of it. Why you egged him on to get me and the rest of the team into this mess, and then double-crossed the man you're going to marry, or—"

She leaned toward him and whispered tensely: "You can't possibly believe I'm in love with that little—beast!"

"Well—er—no. I fancy that his quite evident wealth, as one of the Japs might elegantly put it, won you over."

"*Oh!* I hate you!" cried Miss Lee. "What right have you to think that"—she caught herself up, and ended lamely—"but I guess that's just what you *would* think."

"But if you don't care for him and his money is no inducement, why on earth *are* you marrying him?"

"Oh, don't you realize that if I marry Walter Watson, it will be only because he is forcing me? But now, Number Two has given me my way out!"

"You're not figuring on shooting Watson!"

She gave him an odd look. "No," she replied quietly, "but I will shoot myself before I will be married to that horrible reptile."

Charlie was shocked. He caught her arm and shook her in his excitement. "But—but look here—" he stammered. "He can't force you to marry him—that's a lot of storybook hooey."

"Is it?" said Miss Lee. "And because you never heard of a basketball team being kidnaped, you'll say that can't be done, either."

"Well, it—it's not reasonable—it's—"

She interrupted him with a shrug. "When you've seen more of Walter Watson, Mr. Minor, you'll understand that his unbalanced brain does not reason. The creature believes he's the cleverest mortal on earth—he's convinced that he's a superman, that he can do any blessed thing he pleases and get away with it. And so far, that's pretty near the truth. He hires—pays his way through—he's absolutely unscrupulous and, of course, enormously wealthy."

"Devilish bad combination, eh?"

"Exactly. On the other hand, he believes that powerful enemies are trying to destroy him. That's the reason he has this young army of Japanese around the place—gangsters, every one of them—they're his bodyguards. But we haven't much time left. He'll be back here directly when he's finished laying down the law to his henchmen."

"But how did Watson get you here—your people—"

"My people think I am at school, and the school thinks I'm down with flu at the Lanes'. It's a terrible mixup, but I can't explain now. Mr. Watson kidnaped me just as he did you boys, only in my case none of my family or friends *know* that I'm in any danger at all."

"Good gosh!" Charlie exploded as he began to see light. "How does he think he can get away with it?"

"He's crazy—completely insane. He thinks he can get away with anything. Listen, now—don't ask any more questions. There are some things I must tell you. I had you kidnaped, all of you—"

"To help you?"

"Yes—be quiet, please. Mr. Watson is a basketball fan, plays himself in his private gym with the Japs. That's what gave me the idea of getting the Clarkville team to play against him. Now listen—after you've done what I tell you it's absolutely necessary that you give yourself up. That game must be played and as soon as possible, because it may give you a chance to get the upper hand when you're on the gym floor. There will be more than two to one against you—I'd hoped the coach and substitutes would be brought along, but I guess that devil didn't want to take the chance. Anyway, it was the only thing I could think of to bring help to me—and—I'm sorry for dragging you all into this mess, but I don't think you know how desperate I was." Her voice shook on the last words, and Charlie patted her hand.

"We'll do our best, don't you worry. It was a smart trick, all right, and I think it'll work in the end," he told her, although privately he was none too hopeful.

"Thank you. I think you're swell to say so," she whispered. "Now—you must get out of the house and communicate with the outside world, if possible. If you could only let the police or somebody know where the team is!"

Charlie made a grimace. "*I'm* no superman," he said grimly. "Honestly, I don't think there's an earthly chance of getting over that wall, even if I could get that far."

The girl stood with her head bent, pressing her temples with slim fingers. "No . . . but—but you might throw something over—that's it! The state road parallels the wall for nearly half a mile on both sides of the main entrance—" She looked at him, her eyes shining—

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes. Number Two told me—he wouldn't have any reason for lying about it—"

"No, I guess not. He seems to be your friend—but—"

"But what?"

"Your big idea would be swell on a calm night in June, maybe. Suppose I *could* manage to toss a message over the wall, where do you think it would land, in this gale?"

"Wait a minute," she smiled. "My idea was to have you toss a couple of basketballs over the wall! You see? Any one finding them would naturally wonder what on earth brought them there—and this kidnaping must have been broadcast long ago—so then things would start happening, wouldn't they? It's about the only thing we can do, anyhow."

Charlie stared at her in unconcealed admiration. This girl had brains as well as beauty. "You go to the head of the class! That's certainly the pussycat's pink pants! Say, where do I get the balls? In the private gym?"

"Yes. You know the door to the garage passage, of course?"

"I do—came that way."

"I thought you said so. The gym door is just to the right of the garage passage, and the balls are—"

She broke off as voices were heard down the corridor, then fumbled in a pocket and thrust a key into his hand, pushing him toward the window. "Pass key," she whispered. "Got it from Number Two—no use to me—door always bolted."

"Where's your room?"

"Same wing as yours—floor above. Fire escape outside the window, but the window's barred. Look out for Eckstein, the secretary. He's worse than Watson, if possible. Get in there now, they're coming!"

"Cheerio!" murmured Charlie, continuing to gaze at her as he backed through the curtains.

She smiled at him and sprang across the room, taking a nonchalant pose in an easy chair near the door. Then, as his eyes

caught and held hers, she threw up one hand in a gay and gallant salute, and her lips shaped the words, "Good luck!"

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# CHAPTER X

## A SHOT IN THE DARK

As the draperies fell into place, Charlie stood fingering the key she had given him. Miss Lee—he wondered what her first name was—was one swell girl. Brave, too! Then he heard the door to the hall close and Walter Watson's voice broke the silence.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, my dear. It took me longer than I expected."

"It did seem a long time," she answered. "Did you get the men to go after the missing player?"

"I am—er—always successful in my undertakings, Elizabeth," was the pompous reply.

Elizabeth! So that was her name. Charlie thought it was a nice name, too—sort of suited her. In his mind's eye he could picture her sitting in the big chair watching Watson as he strutted up and down the room, fairly consumed with his own importance.

"I do hope," she was saying, "you'll be successful in finding the Clarkville captain."

"Oh, they will find him, my dear. I have laid my plan and it cannot fail. How about it, Eckstein? Impossible for Minor to slip through now, eh?"

"Mr. Watson's plan leaves no loophole," a deep voice boomed.

"Fine!" said Elizabeth. "I'm crazy to see you and your team play against the Clarkville Five, Wally!"

"You will see them, my dear, believe me." Then sharply to the secretary. "Have you got those diagrams in your pocket, Eckstein?"

"Yes, sir. They are here."

"Spread them out on the desk—that's right. Come over here, Elizabeth. I want you to see the trick offensive plays I worked out earlier this evening. Just as soon as the men catch Minor, we'll put them to good use on the court."

He began to explain his offensive program for the coming game, and Charlie, while he listened, thought it would be just as well to get a glimpse of Secretary Eckstein. With the greatest care, for now more than ever they must not suspect his presence, he made an opening between the draperies and peered through.

A figure of almost gigantic stature stood at the end of the desk looking over Elizabeth's shoulders, as Watson pointed at the papers flattened out before them. He looked a typical criminal type—almost too typical, Charlie thought. His size was enormous, his eyes piercing, sinister, unblinking; and his hands, that looked as though they could easily strangle a bull, continually pulled at his black beard. He had all the suave insolence of the Oriental and the suspicious alertness of one constantly on guard, though, as Charlie noted, he seemed wholly without fear. It had not taken more than a minute of scrutiny of Secretary Eckstein for Charlie to decide that here was the real brains of the Watson menage, and that to fool such a man, even most trivially, could be counted a triumph.

"Darned nasty customer," he thought and allowed the peephole to close. Watson and the Japs were bad enough, but in this giant he saw a more formidable enemy. "Probably carries a gun like the rest of them—and more than willing to use it." Somehow Elizabeth Lee's plan didn't look so cozy now that Eckstein had taken his place in the picture. But she was speaking now and Charlie was all attention again.

"You certainly are a wonder, Wally. Those plays are strokes of genius." He heard her stifle a yawn. "I'm sorry, Wally dear, but I'm simply perishing for sleep. If I don't get some before your men make their capture, I won't be able to keep my eyes open at the all-important game."

"They won't be starting out for another half hour," Watson said. "I gave them that time to finish their supper and get a couple of stiff drinks into them against the cold. But run along, and catch your beauty sleep. In fact—er—like most great men I need little or no rest, but I suppose it is well not to overdo, and I think I'll turn in myself for an hour or so. Eckstein will show you to your room."

"Must I be locked in again?"

"Certainly, my dear. You will remember we've a house full of gangsters and criminals. It is for your own protection,

Elizabeth."

"Oh, very well. But I do think it's unnecessary."

"You will let me be the judge of that, please. Good night, my dear."

"Good night, Wally."

"And—Eckstein!"

"Yes, sir—"

"See that you bring Miss Lee's key to my bedroom."

"Yes, sir."

"And see to it that you don't loiter on the way. You're a clever chap and useful, but I never have and never will trust you farther than I can see."

"You misjudge me, Mr. Watson." The man's voice was like steel.

"The devil I do! Now, clear out—no, wait a minute—I'll go with you."

Charlie heard his hurried steps on the hardwood floor beyond the rug in the doorway. Then the door banged and he knew that the trio were leaving by way of the inner room. Giving them hardly more than a minute leeway, he pushed the curtains aside and hastened toward the door at the opposite end of the room.

He found the passage empty, and hastening down the short stair came to the servants' hall, where he stopped and listened. The sound of voices and the clink of china told him that the Japs were still at table behind one of the closed doors. Giving it a wide berth, he tiptoed over to the door Elizabeth Lee had told him led to the gymnasium. Luckily it was unlocked, and bringing his flashlight into play once more, he descended the steps into the basement.

The beam from his flash picked out two doors in the right hand wall. He tried them both and found them locked. At the far end of this passage, he found another door which he decided must lead into the gymnasium. But this door also failed to budge.

It came to Charlie's mind that in certain stories he had read, the hero, when confronted with a similar situation, usually solved the problem by smashing the door panels with his fist.

"And that," said Captain Minor *sotto voce*, "is the bunk! All I'd smash would be my knuckles, if not my whole hand!"

Those basketballs looked farther away than ever—until he remembered the key that Elizabeth had given him. She had said it was a pass key . . . maybe. . . . But that proved just another disappointment. Probably worked in the main part of the house, but his attempts to fit it into the heavy locks which fastened these doors were futile. Suddenly he discovered that one of the pair of doors in the passage was topped by a transom. Standing on tiptoe he reached up and pushed the pane of glass, which gave slightly under his touch. Getting a good grip on the lintel, he set his foot on the doorknob, pulled his body upward and presently squeezed, puffing and panting, through the open transom.

So far, so good. But the rest was not so easy. Hanging head downward, he finally managed by dint of more squeezing and the loss of some skin, to extricate the flash from his pocket. When the light pierced the dark void below, he saw that this was a locker-room, and what was more to the point, that the lockers were set against the walls on both sides of the door.

Eventually, holding on with bent knees, he got his hands on the top of a locker. A few seconds later, he was investigating the lockers which to his jubilation he found unlocked. These held the usual paraphernalia of gym lockers—none of it important or worth a second look. Then as his light swerved, it fell upon a couple of basketballs lying under a bench. Eureka!

Charlie grabbed them, the spring-lock on the door gave him no trouble now, and he let himself into the passage, his heart thumping exultantly.

He sped back along the passage with his precious trophies and up the steps. Making sure that the servants' hall was clear, he crossed to the garage passageway, and in no time at all his electric torch was sending a bright beam over the floor of the garage itself.

It was just as he had left it when he climbed out of the auto trunk, with the dozen or so cars parked in regular rows. Number Two's fur coat was retrieved and put on, and he found his woolen skating cap in the pocket where he had stuffed

it. Then his eyes caught sight of a small coupé facing the doors, and an idea struck him. Placing the basketballs on the floor of the coupé, he swung open one of the wide garage doors. Back in the little car, he got the engine going, rolled out and was speeding down the winding drive under the bright electric lamps without any one the wiser, so far as he knew, or, at the moment, cared.

Snow was still falling thickly in fat, heavy flakes, but the wind had abated greatly, as Charlie noted with particular satisfaction. To toss a ball in a fifty-mile gale with any accuracy is practically impossible, and though his troubles were by no means at an end, one difficulty at least was taken care of.

The coupé whizzed around a turn in the drive, and Charlie found himself already within sight of the lodge gates before he realized it. He came to a stop with grinding brakes, and promptly reversed around the bend. Here he got out and taking his basketballs with him, cut into the woods on his right at a diagonal from the road.

Ten minutes of pushing through branches of snow-laden evergreens, where his flashlight proved a great help, and of plowing through huge drifts where it was no help at all, brought him at last to the wall of the estate. It was a formidable barrier, topped with iron spikes and bottle glass, and impossible to scale without a ladder. Between the wall and the nearest trees a space of fifty or sixty feet had been left clear of planting. Charlie's next move was to climb the most convenient tree in the near vicinity, leaving one of the balls carefully cradled in a drift at the base of the tree.

It was not the easiest job in the world, to climb an evergreen hampered by a basketball and a heavy fur coat, but Charlie managed it at last, although he had to make it in two trips, having fumbled the ball on the first try.

Eventually he got his feet braced on two branches near the top of the tree, facing the wall, and his back against the trunk, where he obtained a fairly clear view of the highway. Banks of snow on either side of the road marked the passage of a plow earlier in the evening. Charlie prayed that it would come through again before the ball, if it landed, would be covered with fresh snow.

Now he spat on it for good luck, then held it in both hands with fingers and thumbs spread and palms cupped in front of his chest. His elbows were down and his wrists bent backward. Gauging his distance with an expert eye, he made the pass by simply extending his arms, giving a quick snap of the wrists and, as the ball left his hands, down snapped his thumbs to put the English on it he considered necessary.

Over the wall it sailed in a low arc, traveling slowly over the snow to land on the road just beyond the bank made by the snowplow. It bounced once in the soft snow, rolled forward a yard or two and came to rest in just about the middle of the road.

Charlie gazed with pardonable pride at the result of his chest pass, then he clambered down the tree, recovered the second ball and walking further along the wall for a hundred yards, chose another tree and repeated the procedure. This time the ball was placed in approximately the same position, landing a little nearer to the side, closer to the banked-up snow in the gutter.

Although he could not foretell the result or how effective his bait might prove, Charlie felt elated at having finally taken some action that might lead to the rescue of the team—and Elizabeth. It was, literally, a shot in the dark—and he could only hope and pray that the balls would be discovered by a quick-witted and responsible soul.

His job done, he floundered back to the driveway and found Mr. Walter Watson's coupé just where he'd left it. With a sigh of relief and weariness, he climbed in, turned around and drove back toward the house. But instead of turning down the short way to the garage, he swept round to the front door.

A moment later he mounted a flight of broad stone steps deep with snow and rang the doorbell.

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# CHAPTER XI

## CHARLIE VS. WATSON-ECKSTEIN

Charlie waited several minutes, shivering beneath his fur coat. Then he put his thumb on the bell again and kept it there. Presently he heard the rattle of bolt and chain and lock and the heavy oak swung inward. He was facing Eckstein's gigantic figure. The man stared at him, and stepping aside, motioned him to enter. Charlie walked into the vestibule, the door closed ponderously behind him and he turned to the black-bearded secretary.

"Well?" said that gentleman challengingly.

"Mr. Walter Watson at home?" Charlie's manner conveyed nothing more than polite inquiry.

"Who are you?" was the sharp rejoinder.

Charlie slipped a numbed hand into his pocket and drew it forth empty.

"Well, well, I guess I've forgotten my cards," he said pleasantly. "The name is Minor—Charles Hadley Minor."

The secretary's prehensile fingers strayed from his beard to the side pocket of his coat. He did not speak at once.

Though apparently unconscious of the move, Charlie's quick eyes caught it and he made a mental note. "Carries a gun and seems ready and willing to use it." Aloud he said, "By the way, this fur coat I'm wearing belongs to a friend of yours." He shrugged out of the garment and dropped it on a chair. "You might tell Number Two, when you return it to him, that his loaded gun is resting nicely in the right-hand pocket."

"You," said the secretary slowly, "certainly have your nerve with you, young man!"

Charlie grinned. "And how I need it!" he agreed fervently. "Some June days are rare," he continued, "others are particularly well done. This one happens to be calendared in March. So if it's all the same to you, old thing, let's leave this clammy vestibule and seek the nice warm fire. I'm three-quarters frozen, in spite of the jolly old coonskin!"

"Have you any further wishes?" the big man asked sarcastically.

"Oh, well, a nice sirloin with onions and French fried would be much to the merry. Or last week's Irish stew would not be despised. Not to mention some hot coffee—that would undoubtedly save my valuable life. You know, it isn't often you guys have a chance to re-kidnap anybody, and certainly it ought to be worth a hot meal and a bed. Let's go, Goliath! I'm famished."

He turned his back on the bewildered secretary, opened the inner door and walked into a huge entrance hall, where glassy eyes of mounted animal heads glared at him from the dark paneled walls. He made straight for the log fire that smoldered on a huge stone hearth, and held out his stiff fingers to receive the comforting warmth.

"Indeed," said a voice above him, "indeed this *is* an unexpected pleasure!"

Descending the broad staircase Charlie saw Walter Watson's diminutive figure, clad in pajamas and a woolen dressing-gown. He was talking as he came, and so short was he that the top of his curly head barely reached the level of the banister rail.

Charlie wheeled about and directed his grin upon the kidnaper. "The pleasure," he said, "is mutual. I don't mind saying that never in my life has a fire felt so good. Nice spring weather we're having this year, I don't think!"

Watson smiled in excellent good nature. "Yes, I dare say you've discovered that being on the inside looking out is much more to be desired. And naturally I agree with you, Mr. Minor.—It *is* Mr. Minor, isn't it?"

"Your uncanny perception is only surpassed by your—er—hospitality, Mr. Watson."

"Well, well—so you know my name, eh?"

Eckstein, who had been standing nearby, gloomily stroking his beard, now entered the conversation.

"He asked for you by name, sir, when I let him in, and what is more, he drove up in a car. There's something queer about this, Mr. Watson. May I suggest that you insist upon an explanation?" He glared at Charlie, who was in no way perturbed—on the contrary.

"There's really nothing to explain, you know," said that young man suavely. "Of course I re-kidnapped myself, as it were, and borrowed your car into the bargain. As we all know, the gates at the end of the driveway are closed and well guarded, and I just decided to take advantage of your hospitality after all." He smiled engagingly at the dwarf. "Nice little bus of yours, sir. I left her parked in front of the terrace. May I suggest that Comrade Goliath, or Mr. Bluebeard or whatever his present moniker may be, run her round to the garage where I found her? Otherwise it'll take considerably more than one servant to move her, in the morning."

Eckstein went green beneath his beard and took a step toward Charlie.

"You young whelp!" he began furiously.

"Silence!" thundered his master.

"He called me a servant—"

"What of that?" The dwarf frowned up at his secretary.

"Am I to be insulted by any young whipper-snapper who—"

"Looks that way, Eckstein—you *are* my paid secretary, you know."

Charlie raised his hand. "Oh, I *beg* your pardon, Mr.—er—Eckstein. Sorry I made such a blunder—the situation being such—I—I took you for the bouncer, you see."

Eckstein scowled fiercely and tugged at his beard. "Enough of this drivel," he growled. "An excellent method of evading the real issue. Now, if you don't mind, be good enough to inform us who it was told you Mr. Watson's name!"

Charlie assumed a tone of chill reproof. "When an estate of this size borders a state highway, the owner's name naturally becomes known to motorists who travel in this part of the country, and are interested enough to make inquiries, Mr. Eckstein."

"Had you ever seen Mr. Watson before, Mr. Minor?"

"I had not. But every lover of sport has heard of him—as a big game hunter—" Charlie fervently hoped that the heads mounted on the walls had been trophies of his host—"and because of the keen interest he takes in basketball."

"Ah, there, you see, Eckstein!" The dwarf fairly quivered with pride. "Of course I am well known to sportsmen the world over!"

"I don't doubt it, sir. But that still doesn't explain why Minor didn't take me for you when I let him in. If you want my candid opinion, I believe that this young man is lying, and that there is a traitor in our organization."

Charlie promptly registered indignation. "You're privileged to believe what you like. But I put it up to Mr. Watson—would it be likely that a man of his wealth and prominence should take a servant's place and answer the doorbell—especially in the middle of the night?"

"Why, naturally not—naturally not," Watson rumbled in his deep bass, his chubby countenance beaming with satisfied ego. "Give Mr. Minor credit for knowing a gentleman when he sees one." He swung round on Charlie, as the secretary snorted savagely. "My apologies to you—from one sportsman to another, so to speak—for this—ah—so-called kidnaping to-night. Circumstances forced me into it, my young friend, or I should never have pulled you away from the game in the State College Gymnasium."

"Don't mention it," said Charlie politely, "though you must admit it's a bit rough on us as a team. We've lost our chance for the championship now, and that's a pretty tough break."

"But I'll do my best to make up for that in other ways," protested the little man. "We'll discuss that later. You must be hungry, and pretty well exhausted, aren't you?"

Charlie grinned and nodded. "If you'll lead me to a meal and a bed I'll be eternally grateful, Mr. Watson."

"Of course. The meal will be served in your room. We'll go there at once." Walter Watson, whose inordinate vanity had been even further inflated by Charlie's flattery, took the young fellow by the arm, while the huge secretary looked on with ill-concealed disapproval. "I have ordered everything to be prepared for you, Minor. You're a young man after my own heart. Come along now, and we'll see how the rest of the servants respect my wishes."

He gave the lowering Eckstein a malicious grin and led the way upstairs. The room which had been assigned to the



captain of Clarkville's team was on the second story, somewhere at the back of the big house.

"This is the guest wing," explained the host, ushering Charlie over the threshold with a return of the pompous manner which sat so absurdly upon the undersized figure. "Your comrades are sleeping close by.—Confound it!" he broke off, "—your supper has not arrived. Excuse me." He darted into the corridor, shut and locked the door and Charlie was left alone.

The room was of fair size, but in no way resembled any guest chamber Charles Hadley Minor had ever seen before. Over-furnished with a strange assortment of period styles, velvet draperies and Turkish rugs, quantities of small brass bowls, trays and unknown objects littered the small tables and hanging shelves that occupied every available space. "Looks like a second-hand dealer's paradise," thought Charlie. Then he spied the bed in one corner of the room, shrouded in heavy silk canopies, and where a pair of silk pajamas lay neatly folded at the foot. He was wondering whether he could stay awake long enough to wait for the food, when the lock clicked and Walter Watson reentered the room.

A Jap followed at his heels, carrying a tray laden with covered dishes. The man set his burden on a table, drew up a chair, whisked the covers from the dishes, bowed and walked out, closing the door behind him.

"There you are—" Watson waved his hand, "steak with onions and French fried potatoes were the order. I hope you find them to your liking. Coffee is likely to keep you awake, but I think you'll agree that this hot spiced cider is a grand drink on a cold night."

Charlie thanked the dwarf, took the proffered chair and immediately set knife and fork to work. He ate with the keen appetite of the famished. The food was delicious and the hot cider went right to the spot. He had no hesitation in saying so as soon as he could spare time to speak.

"Fine, I'm glad you enjoy it," his host returned genially. He flung out his wrist and looked at his watch. "Twelve-twenty-five. I hate to hurry you, Minor, but you'll be called at five o'clock. A light breakfast—coffee, toast and an egg will be served to you here at five-fifteen. You will then be escorted downstairs to the gymnasium. The game is scheduled for six sharp."

"Game? What game?" asked Charlie in well-feigned surprise.

Walter Watson smiled. "You and your teammates were brought here to play basketball with my own private team of which I'm captain," he explained. "You may consider the method used in this affair rather—ah—unique, but I had my reasons. You know, the trodden path never appeals to the great men of the world."

Charlie was taken with a strange fit of coughing. "Bit—risky, wasn't it?" he managed to gasp after a moment.

Watson's stubby eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Do you mean to suggest that I am incapable of taking care of the consequences—"

"Oh, no. No, indeed," denied Charlie, his mouth full of French fried potatoes. "I—I only thought," he went on, "that it's quite probable half the country is looking for us, and it'll take some explaining when they do run us to earth, won't it?"

"I never explain!" The angry color ran up into Mr. Watson's chubby face and there was a lightning flash from his sharp eyes. "What is more, the police and the rest of the rabble who are scouring the countryside will never run you fellows to earth. Minds of such caliber can never cope with mine."

Charlie said nothing. It would not do to irritate this unbalanced egotist too far. He continued to devour the remainder of his meal.

The dwarf resumed, "When the game is over, you will all be given a substantial meal, and a substantial present to repay you for the inconvenience I have put you to, and then you will be returned either to your hotel in Hartford, or to Clarkville School, as you wish."

Charlie drained the last of the cider and pushed back his chair. "That's awfully kind of you, Mr. Watson—but don't you think it possible that the authorities may not sympathize with your motives?"

"What if they don't? You fellows will have nothing to worry about."

"Oh, no—I didn't mean—"

"Then why—"

"Well, I'm just puzzled, that's all. I was only wondering how a man of your unusual attainments would figure a way out of the disagreeable aftermath—the inevitable run-in with the authorities. You don't mind my asking, I hope?"

Charlie dared not look the little man in the face after that. He gazed blandly at a handsomely bound edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* which occupied the uppermost shelf on the opposite wall.

"Oh, that's an easy one!" Watson's frown became what might be termed Olympian. "I won't be here, you see—not anywhere in the country, for that matter. Directly after the game, I'm to be married. And so soon as the short ceremony is over, my bride and I will go by air to New London where my yacht is awaiting us. I shall not return to America for two years. By that time the kidnaping of Clarkville's Fighting Five will be a dead issue. And of course, a few worth-while tips judiciously distributed will bury it for good and all."

Charlie shook his head admiringly. "You certainly are a genius, sir." And if Walter Watson's eyes hadn't been blinded by his own vainglory, he would have seen the young man's mouth twitch in a most suspicious manner.

There was a knock on the door and the Japanese butler appeared. At a nod from his master, he took up the tray, bowed first to him, and then to Charlie and vanished.

Watson stood up. "It's high time we both got some sleep. Good night—see you in the morning."

"Good night, Mr. Watson. This has been a privilege as well as a pleasure, I assure you—"

His host beamed. "The pleasure," he returned, "is all mine." Then the door closed after him and Charlie heard the key turn in the lock.

"You bet the pleasure is all yours!" muttered Charlie to himself. "Lord! What a sap!"

Slowly he undressed and donned the green silk pajamas. Then he opened the window an inch or so, switched off the lights and crawled into bed. For a while he lay there in the dark, his tired body resting luxuriously under the warm covers and his over-active mind working somewhat after this manner.

"Not such a bad jamboree, after all. Could have been much worse. . . . Wish that pretty kid wasn't mixed up in it. Poor girl. . . . S'pose if this were written up in a book the author'd have me get up and pull off a rescue right now. Yeah! Maybe he'd have a plane on the roof so we could make a swell getaway. . . . Even if I did manage to find her room and get her out of it, darned if I'd know what to do next—without the author's airbus. . . . But girl or no girl, I'll fool 'em and stay right here. Gosh, what a night! Sure am tired. Playin' up to that little nut Watson took the starch outa me. Nice enough to-night when I ladled out the soft soap—but what'll he do in the morning when I put the other guys wise and we start things humpin'? . . . That big lad Eckstein . . . he's a gorilla. I'd hate to have him get those hands on me. Gives me the creeps, that guy. . . . Too bad I had to turn over Number Two's gun. But they knew I had it—and it was a good gesture, at that. Gee. . . . I'm gettin' as bad as Wally-darling! Dirty skunks, the pair of them to kidnap that girl and then try to tie her up to that louse. . . .

"Queer voice he's got . . . you'd think he's Galahad himself when he isn't angry—but when he *is*—whew! Some liar, too. First he told the girl the wedding would be at ten, then he shoves the time ahead. Right after the game, he said, and that's to be at six. Ungodly hour to pull off a game. Will she be there to watch it?

"Gosh, what a mixup! A sweet kid if there ever was one! What—what was her name? Oh, yes—Elizabeth Lee. . . . I like 'em tall and slender. . . . What was I thinking about? Oh, yes. . . . Elizabeth! Wonder if . . ."

But what Charlie wondered then will never be known, for at this point in his reflections the Captain of Clarkville's Fighting Five fell sound asleep.

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## CHAPTER XII

### PLANS ARE MADE

"Good morning, sir. It is five o'clock. Light breakfast is serving in fifteen minutes."

Charlie turned wearily over, opened his eyes, blinked once or twice in the strong light of the electric, and saw that the Jap who had brought his midnight meal was standing beside the bed.

"Oh, it's you," he said drowsily. "*Not* a good morning, if you want my candid opinion. How're the chances for a bath? I'll never wake up unless I get under cold water, perish the thought."

"Bath this way, sir." The man motioned toward an open door which had been hidden by the wall hangings the night before. Then he took a heavy woolen bathrobe from the back of a chair and held it out.

Exercising considerable will power, Charlie sat up, swung his long legs over the side of the bed, shoved his feet into a pair of fleece-lined slippers and stood up.

"Thanks," he slipped into the bathrobe, "—all the comforts of home, what?"

"Will honorable gentleman use perfumed salts in bath?"

"Take mine straight, thank you. What's the weather doing this merry morn?"

"Snow continue to fall heavily, sir. Although die down in night, blowing very hard now."

Charlie yawned. "Well, phone the weather man to turn on fair and warmer, will you? Be seein' you." He started for the bathroom.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Yes?" Charlie looked around.

"Honorable Watson say—will gentleman dress in basketball clothes?"

"Oh, sure. Anything to please him. Where are they?"

The Jap pointed to a small pile of clothing on a chair. "There, sir. Honorable Watson say hope rubber shoes fit. They same size shoes gentleman wear."

Charlie looked his surprise. "Have the other members of the team been fitted out the same way?"

"Honorable Watson forget nothing—he see to everything, sir."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" Charlie disappeared into the bathroom, marveling at the scope of his host's boast.

A few minutes later he returned refreshed and feeling ready for anything. He found his Oriental servitor arranging a breakfast tray on a small table. The man bowed low and went out. Captain Minor turned his attention to the clothes on the chair.

There is a saying among basketball coaches that the player is no better than his shoes. Charlie knew that shoes are certainly the most important piece of equipment a basketball player wears. He knew that they should be light but have heavy soles of spongy rubber which will break the force of constant pounding on hard surfaces. Basketball, with its constant starting and quick stopping is particularly hard on your feet unless you have shoes with soft soles that fit you properly.

That is why, after pulling on a pair of short, lightweight woolen socks he tried on the shoes before even looking at the other things. Gratified to find that they were all that any one could ask for, and a splendid fit in the bargain, he cast aside his bathrobe and pulled a cotton gym shirt over his head. This fitted, too, and he was pleased to find it cotton rather than wool because wool, when you get hot, tends to make your skin itchy and decidedly uncomfortable. Next he got into a supporter of the bike type and found that the gym pants fitted as they should; snug around the waist, fairly loose around the hips, and that they came down his thighs about halfway to the knee.

But the greatest surprise of all was the warming-up suit which he promptly put on over his basketball togs. The loose jacket and trousers were dark blue with light blue piping—the Clarkville School colors—and the astonished young man

recognized C. B. T. in the monogram embroidered on the jacket pocket.

"Pretty swell!" Captain Minor was surveying his tall, broad-shouldered figure in the mirror. "Wally-dear may be a nut and a kidnaper but he certainly goes the whole hog when it comes to hospitality!"

Luckily the words had not been spoken aloud, for at that instant the key clicked in the lock and the gentleman himself walked into the room. He was dressed in a warming-up suit of red and black over his basketball togs, and in spite of his lack of inches and his chubby face, it occurred to Charlie that Walter Watson was well built and a trim figure of a man for his size.

"Good morning, sir. Thanks for the clothes. They fit to perfection—you certainly got us up in style."

"Morning, Minor," returned the little man. "Glad you find them comfortable. I've just been looking in on the other fellows of your team. Proper equipment makes such a difference in basketball. Didn't want my own team to have any advantage in that respect."

"Nice of you," said Charlie. "How are the fellows?"

Watson grinned. "Rather grumpy. They're dressed and eating breakfast together. But they told me they'd see me in Hades before they'd get out on the gym floor and play basketball at my invitation."

"I'll have to have a chat with them," said Charlie, "and make them see the error of their ways." He waved toward the breakfast table. "Seems to be a plentiful supply of toast, eggs and coffee here, and I notice your man brought two cups—won't you join me?"

"That," returned his host, "is the idea I had." He pulled up a chair and sat down opposite. "You wonder," he went on as he poured the coffee, "how a man nearing middle age, like myself, manages to keep so fit? But I have a set of rules that I follow, and they've done the trick."

"What are they?" asked Charlie and broke his egg.

"To condition yourselves for basketball, Minor, you fellows ought to observe the same rules of living that you do for other strenuous sports. In brief, get plenty of sleep, at least nine hours each night, two of them before midnight."

"Last night didn't set us a very good example," smiled Charlie. "I could do with about nine hours more right now."

"Don't be facetious," admonished Watson. "This is serious. Eat regularly of substantial foods, don't smoke and don't use alcohol. Smoking is extremely bad for basketball players because smoking shortens the wind. In basketball, more than any other game, you need good wind. In most games you have a chance to stop for a minute or two between plays, but in basketball you're going strenuously from the time the game starts till it ends."

Charlie nodded and munched his toast, thinking that this little man might be unbalanced, but he could talk sense when it came to training for basketball.

"In connection with eating," his host continued, "it is a good thing to remember that if you're playing at night you should have your heavy meal at noon and eat only a light supper at least two hours before the game. If you're playing an afternoon game, eat lightly at noon."

"Yes, that's good dope," agreed Charlie. "You talk like Coach Parker. He's frightfully particular when it comes to training—and everything else about the game, for that matter. We're breaking just about every training rule, though, in this match. I s'pose it can't be helped."

"No, it can't. Because of unavoidable circumstances, we must make the best of it and I look to you to put the other members of the Clarkville team into a more reasonable frame of mind. If this game is a fizzle because they continue to hold grudges, I sadly fear that unpleasant complications will arise—unpleasant for all of us, you understand."

Charlie's only motive in playing up to the odd little man was to gain his confidence so that he might be permitted to get together with the other fellows before the game. There were several things they must be put wise to, if Elizabeth Lee was to be rescued, and now that he'd gained his object all unsuspected, he was content. Pretty soon Mr. Walter Watson was going to get a taste of his own double-crossing methods, but until the time was ripe, it was all to Clarkville's advantage to keep him unsuspecting and in a good humor. Clarkville's captain therefore paid no attention to the thinly veiled threat. He finished his second cup of coffee and looked inquiringly across the white cloth.

"When are you going to let me use my persuasive powers on those chumps?"

Watson looked at his watch. "Right now, if you've finished. Ready?"

"Ready's brother!"

"Good—let's go."

Together they left the bizarre bedroom, but instead of being taken to a meeting-place on that floor, Charlie was led to a back staircase. Descending this, they reached the servants' hall and eventually stopped outside the locker room where Charlie had squeezed through the transom the night before.

"I'll leave you here," said his small guide, looking like a child in the dimly lighted passageway. "Please explain to your men that the game I brought them here for will be played under the official basketball rules of the National Basketball Committee of the United States and Canada. In other words, we'll use this year's rules. You, of course, should be conversant with them, but in order to obviate any chance of argument after the game begins, I suggest you read this year's list of changes in the rules to your team. Just a fad of mine, you know, but worth the trouble, I feel, especially when the referee must of necessity be one of my men. Here's the list. Go on in, now, and I'll send the four of them down right away."

He hustled away, and Charlie went into the empty locker room. Having nothing better to do, he read over the paper Watson had given him. What he had said was true. Minor revisions of the basketball code are made every year and sometimes the shifts are drastic. Even though Charlie knew his rules he was not surprised that one or two of this year's changes had slipped his mind. The paper was headed;

#### *List of Changes*

1. The dimensions of the ideal playing court should be 50 feet by 90 feet for colleges, 50 feet by 84 feet for high schools and 42 feet by 74 feet for junior high schools.
2. The circumference of the ball is to be not less than 29½ inches or more than 30¼ inches.
3. A penalty of one technical foul for each minute of delay when a team fails to report ready for play at the start of each half.
4. The number of the player to be four inches high on the front of his shirt and the number on the back to be six inches high.
5. In high school tournaments, the first team that scores two points in an overtime game will be the victor.
6. Officials must hand the ball to the player starting action from an out-of-bounds play.
7. On a free throw successfully made, time will not be resumed until the ball is put into play at center.
8. On a free throw resulting from a personal foul, time will not start until the ball misses the basket.

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He finished reading and looked up. Shorty, Monk, Zip and Bull tramped into the room, all talking at once and continuously.

Where in thunderation had *he* been? Who was this sawed-off guy?—the chief kidnaper? Who were the Japs and where was this dump, anyway?

Why had they been yanked away in the middle of the game with Ridgetown? And what was all this hooey about playing some team now? This was a fine time of day to play basketball! Charlie could tell that baby-faced basketballer where to shove off. A wonder that nutty guy or half a dozen Japs didn't pull 'em out of bed in the middle of the night!

"Hey, cut it out, fellows! One at a time!" Their captain made himself heard at last by sheer force of lung power. "Hi, you, Monk Leeming! Answer *my* questions. There isn't much time and this is terribly important. Pipe down, Shorty—and you, too, Zip and Bull!"

"Well, what's the big idea? Where do you get that stuff!" growled Monk. "To hear you talk any one would think that you were running this show."

Charlie nodded. "That's it, Monk, old thing. I'm captain of this team and if you guys want to get out of here and

incidentally save a perfectly swell girl who's being forced into marrying that crazy runt Watson, button up your lips and listen to me."

"Okay, Charlie." It was Shorty Fiske who answered him. "But you needn't be so uppish about it."

"Goldarn nasty, I call him," remarked Bull Brown.

"Foul!" said Zip.

"Aw, give him a chance!" cried Monk. "What do you want me to tell you, old top?"

"What happened when you fellows landed here, Monk?"

"Darn little. We were taken up to a two-room suite on the second floor—under guard of those Japs of course. Then after a while the bird they call Watson showed up. He informed us that if we behaved like good little boys and didn't break the furniture we'd be given supper. He told us he wasn't looking for any ransom, that we'd been brought here to play a game of basketball that might be pulled off sometime during the night or early this morning—and that we'd be 'adequately recompensed'—his own words—for our inconvenience. He talked fair enough, you know—but—"

"What did you say to him?"

"Well, maybe we were a bit rude to him. I don't know. I must say he was pretty decent, except that he wouldn't answer questions. We wanted to know what had become of you—and half a hundred other things. Nothing doing there, but he sent up a swell meal with all the trimmings. There were twin beds in each room with a bath in between, all mighty comfortable. After the feed we talked things over and decided the best thing we could do was to turn in."

"You forgot to say," cut in Zip Young, "that all the windows were barred and the doors to the hall were locked."

"That's right," went on Monk. "And if we did break into the hall, where were we, with Japs sprouting up all over the place and a howling blizzard outdoors?"

"Exactly," said Charlie. "So you went to bed?"

"We did."

"And then—?"

"A couple of Japs with guns pulled us out a little while ago. They forced us to get into these basketball togs, gave us some breakfast and brought us here. And say, Charlie—where were *you*—what have you been doing all this time? Shootin' baskets with Friend Watson?"

Charlie laughed. "Hardly, Monk. Listen, you guys, and I'll put you wise to where we stand and what we're up against."

In as few words as possible he recounted his adventures of the night, while his amazed teammates listened eagerly.

Monk Leeming slapped him on the back when he'd brought his recital to a close. "You're all to the good, Charlie! Got to hand it to you—you're a wow!"

"And while we were asleep in our beds," said Shorty, "you pulled off those stunts and saved the beautiful heiress. What a life! I never did have any luck."

"The heiress, if she is one," said Charlie seriously, "isn't saved—not by a darn sight she isn't. And you'll have your share of the saving business along with the rest of us in a few minutes if you'll shut your trap and let me tell you what we're goin' to do."

"What I don't see is why this Elizabeth Lee picked on our team to help her out," said Bull Brown. "Any of you fellows know her?"

Monk, Zip and Shorty shook their heads and Charlie broke in again. "What's it matter? She'll probably explain that one of these days if we can get her out of here. The principal thing is, we've got to put a crimp into these Japs before they can get any of us out of the house, and you can take it from me, it's going to be a job."

"You're tellin' me, big boy!" Monk looked glum. "They've got guns and we're not a bunch of jiu jitsu experts like you, Charlie."

"Expert, nothing! Listen, now. Watson thinks I'm persuading you fellows to play his team. That's okay, but I've been some time persuading, and he's likely to bust in on us any minute. I've got an idea. It's not so hot, but still it's the only one I've

been able to figure that gives us the ghost of a chance."

"Spring it," suggested Zip. "We ain't got no ideas."

"Sez you!" began Monk. "Maybe—if—"

"Maybe, nothing. Shut up, Monk!" Shorty broke in. "We want to hear what Charlie's got on his mind."

Monk subsided with a grimace and Captain Minor took the floor again. "Watson and the four Japs who'll be playing against us *won't* be armed, will they?—and we won't give any of 'em a chance to use their wrestling holds."

"How come?" inquired Monk.

"This is the way I've figured it. We'll start the game as usual, and play as though we had nothing on our minds but the winning of this game. After a couple minutes of play, or as soon as I think the time's ripe, each one of us will put his man out of the running."

"How the deuce—" Monk interrupted him.

"Slough 'em! Beat 'em up before they know what's happening."

"How will you give us the sign?" asked Shorty.

"I'll just yell—*Now!* That's not much of a smart trick but it's the only way we can start anything before it's too late."

"Yeah, and then what?"

"Well, Miss Lee has that gun Number Two gave her. She'll be watching, of course, and ought to be able to take care of herself. Maybe she can cover some of the other birds. If she can, she will. There are no flies on that girl."

"Sounds okay, but—" Monk's tone was dubious, "what d'you suppose the rest of the Jap gallery and the referee will be doing all this time?"

"You and Bull will take account of him, get his gun. That's your job. Zip, Shorty and I will go for the others that Elizabeth Lee hasn't got covered."

"And so?"

"And then we'll have to be guided by events as we find 'em," grinned Captain Minor.

"Yeah, sounds swell. But if you want my private opinion I'll bet some one gets shot before this beautiful plan of yours is very far under way, boy."

"That," said Charlie, "is a chance we've all got to take. I don't think that once we've got Watson down and out—and Eckstein, who'll probably be referee—that the Japs will be so keen on using their gats. But, of course, if you think there's no use trying this—"

"Shut up," snapped Monk. "We're all in on it. Just the same it's a risky business. Did you ever see me, though, when I wasn't willing to play the game—"

He broke off short as the door opened and Walter Watson, followed by his secretary, came into the room.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," the little man observed affably. "It tells me that everything has been satisfactorily arranged. And now, Captain Minor, if your team is ready, we'll get going."

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## CHAPTER XIII

### CLARKVILLE VS. WATSON'S JAPS

With Charlie on his right, Walter Watson led the way to the door at the end of the passage which opened into the gymnasium proper. Clarkville's players found themselves on the gym floor beneath the gallery of a running track which circled the big room and was reached by a wooden staircase at the far end.

Charlie noted that the four Japs of Watson's team, wearing orange shirts and shorts, were shooting baskets at that end of the court. Then raising his eyes he saw that Elizabeth Lee was seated on the running track opposite, and that beside her stood Number One and a Jap he did not recognize. So far as he could see, Number Two was not in evidence. He recognized Adatchi as one of the Japs who were shooting baskets and it occurred to him at the same time that these men were no novices at the game. One after the other they sent the ball through the iron hoop with deadly accuracy.

"Go ahead and limber up," suggested Watson, pointing to the near basket, and he walked off toward his own men.

Bull Brown picked up a ball, dribbled it out on the floor and looped a long underhand shot high in the air so that it dropped through the basket without touching the iron. As Zip and Shorty ran out on the floor, Charlie realized that Bull had lamed Miss Lee—and was playing to the gallery! He was placing his warming-up suit on a bench, when Monk Leeming grabbed him by the arm.

"Hey—don't look up—I've solved the mystery!" Monk's voice was a hoarse whisper, throbbing with excitement.

"What mystery, Monk?" Charlie stared at him.

"The reason all this stuff was pinned on Clarkville and—"

"Miss Lee chose us?"

"Yeah—only she isn't 'Miss Lee'!"

"But who—"

"She's *Lee*—" Monk's whisper cracked and he caught his breath.

"Say, what are you talking about?"

"Her name, big boy, is Elizabeth Leeming—better known to her family and friends as Lee Leeming—in short, she's my sister!"

"Holy Smoke!" Covertly Charlie's eyes sought the girl seated across the gym from them. Yes—he thought he could see a resemblance. Stupid of him not to—"Great grief, Monk—this is terrible! It was bad enough when I thought she was a stranger. I suppose Watson took her nickname for her surname."

"Don't care what he took, he's going to lose her pronto, the little whelp! Lee knows the danger of his getting onto our relationship, of course. Just as soon as she was wise to the fact that I'd seen her, she shook her head and pretended to be very much interested in watching those Japs around the other basket. Gosh, Charlie, this is the devil—I'll kill that devil-dwarf before he marries any sister of mine!"

"Snap out of it, Monk. He's a suspicious little beast—we've got to be darned careful. Come on and get busy, now—we'll see what we can do later on."

Monk nodded. "Okay—same plan goes, eh?"

"Yep." Charlie caught a pass from Zip and sent it sailing for a basket. And then with an effort he forced himself to concentrate on the business of the moment.

Presently he saw Eckstein and a Jap who apparently was to act as umpire walk over and speak to Watson. Hurriedly he called his own men to him.

"Listen, team," he whispered. "Monk tells me the girl up there is his sister. That's why she got Watson to kidnap us. No comments, please. Neither Monk nor I know more than just that. Naturally what I said in the locker room goes one hundred percent. Now—here comes Watson—scram!"

Limbering-up over, the referee and umpire stepped to their posts. Zero hour was near. For the Fighting Five, Charlie and



Zip held down the forward berths; Shorty Fiske occupied the pivot spot, while Monk Leeming and Bull Brown were stationed in the back court.

Watson's Japs in vivid orange walked quietly to their places, in striking contrast to the tight-lipped, nervous five from Clarkville. Captain Watson was paired with Zip; his running mate, Adatchi, shook hands with Charlie. At center Shorty drew a surprisingly tall Jap no one had seen before. Monk and Bull squared off with a couple of Orientals who they privately thought would look much neater flat on their backs after a couple of well-placed socks on the jaw!

Up on the running track, Lee Leeming, her face paper white, nerves taut as a fiddle string, sat bolt upright in her chair. The girl's eyes were on the center of the court, but as Charlie gave her a quick glance, he wondered whether she actually saw anything of the scene below her.

The whistle blew. The ball was in flight—then the leap at center as the two lithe figures competed for the tip-off. And then the look of surprise on the face of the tall Jap as Shorty Fiske stole the tap by a good two inches.

Charlie, who had signaled the play, grabbed the ball cleanly. Without an instant's pause, he chest-flipped it to Zip, who with Watson at his heels was slanting in hard from the other side of the court. Down the sideline steamed Monk with a Jap tagging him, and cutting fast as he neared the hoop. Zip, bluffing a return pass to Charlie, suddenly whirled and blazed the shot to Monk. The Clarkville guard nailed the sphere and whipped it through the ring. A goal for the Fighting Five!

The Jap won the next tap, Adatchi to Watson. The latter, attempting a dribble past Zip was crowded out of bounds near his own basket.

"Nice work, Zip," Charlie remarked with a grin which faded as the bearded referee laid a hand on Young's shoulder. Zip, according to the arbiter, had charged his man, which undoubtedly he had. Personal foul.

Walter Watson missed the free toss. The ball glanced off the outer rim of the hoop and Shorty Fiske seized it. Charlie broke to the side and Shorty, who had taken to the air for the ball, flipped across a pass before his feet had touched the ground.

It was a beautiful, aggressive piece of work on Fiske's part, and it caught the Watson-Jap contingent off guard. Immediately the Clarkville attack began to generate. Charlie tried a dribble, found his path choked and bounced a pass to Bull. Shorty came roaring down center, Monk hanging back in case the ball changed hands.

It didn't. Bull slung it to Shorty, and Zip, who was still very much in the game though the short-legged Watson stuck like a leech, streaked down-court to take Shorty's pass in the scoring zone.

"Shoot!" yelled Charlie. "Shoot, Zip!"

The ball blazed away, but his try, badly hurried by his enemies' captain, rolled from the iron ring and dropped toward the court. There came an eager tangle of upthrust hands and a short, fierce scrimmage while the ball glanced off fingertips and bobbed around like a wave-tossed cork. A desperate, leaping tap by Zip Young, the swish of leather passing through the net—Another goal!

Already Charlie knew that in one important point his team was quite the equal of Watson's—and that point was speed. And when it came to honest-to-goodness teamwork, the orange quintet could not touch Clarkville. Wally Watson, despite his short legs, was a wizard at covering ground and his Japs were no slouches in that respect either; still, they lacked the scientific knowledge of the game that stiff training under Coach Parker had made Clarkville what she was on the basketball court.

However, these Japs and their strange little captain were no cinch to play against. The lads from Clarkville had to fight every inch of the way. And the Fighting Five *were* fighting this morning; fighting to tire their fleet-footed opponents, fighting for a break that would put them in position for the crowning stroke of this hard-fought game with their kidnapers.

Captain Charlie Minor was everywhere, dodging, cutting, shooting like a man inspired: Zip, never Charlie's equal as a speedster, fed to the captain on offense and made himself a general nuisance to the Watson-Japs by his clever feinting tactics. Shorty, in spite of his height, was often outjumped, but never outgamed; and the two guards, Monk and Bull, roved about the back court with all the zest and ferocity of a couple of hungry bulldogs.

Monk and Bull were bearing the brunt of the Clarkville defense, and the orange shirts found them something more than stubborn. The kidnapers were gradually being fought to a standstill. Yet when the whistle blew for intermission after one of the fastest, fiercest, hardest-fought periods ever played by either team, Charlie had seen no chance to sound his fateful

signal, and the scoreboard read Clarkville 20, Watson's 16!

A closer study of the score was even more revealing, had any of the Fighting Five been interested in anything but the showdown they intended to put on at the first opportunity. Clarkville had dumped in eight two-pointers and four free throws. The kidnapers, thanks to the stonewall guarding of Leeming and Brown, had been held to five field goals; the rest of their points had come by way of the free-throw line.

Back in the locker room Monk collared Charlie.

"Good Lord, boy," he exclaimed angrily. "How long do you expect us to keep this up? We'll be all in before we get started on the heavy work!"

"Can it, Monk!" said Shorty. "Charlie knows what he's doing."

"Sorry, Monk," returned Charlie, "I'm doing the best I can. One thing in our favor is that they're tiring faster than we are."

"But what's the use of keeping up this camouflage?" Monk rang in again. "All I'm waiting for is to get one good crack at that Jap forward. Good night! It gives me the heebie-jeebies to see Lee sitting up there between those two yellow dogs and looking as if she was waiting to be taken out and shot!"

Zip agreed. "Gosh, I feel sorry for your sister, Monk—she looks done up."

"We all feel sorry for her," cut in Bull Brown. "And we're going to get her out. But there's no sense jumping all over Charlie—I think it's just as wise that nothing was pulled off last period. Watson and his Japs aren't as fresh as they were—and another thing—we've been playing good hard basketball against them just as though we had nothing on our minds but winning this game. You've got to hand it to Charlie for that. At first I thought—I could *see* that my man was suspicious; guess he thought maybe I'd make some kind of a break to get away. It's only natural. But now, I'm sure they all feel we're on the floor to make baskets and for no other reason. When Charlie sees his opening this next half, we'll have a swell chance of taking them clean off their guard. How about it—am I right, guys?"

For Bull, usually so close-mouthed, this was a terrifically long speech. The others realized that nothing but absolute conviction of the truth of his own words could have brought it out of him.

Charlie gave him a slap on the back. "You're a swell booster, old scout. And how about it, team? Am I to carry on, or does somebody else want the job of giving that signal.—Monk?"

"Carry on!" cried four of the Fighting Five in a chorus.

Agreed to a man at last, the Clarkville basketballers hastened back to the court.

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# CHAPTER XIV

## THE SIGNAL

The teams were lined up, waiting for the blast of the whistle which would plunge them into action for the second half. Adatchi, who seemed to have the gift of gab, apparently thought he could talk the kidnapers out of that four-point deficit.

"Well, sonny," he remarked to Charlie, "your kindergarten threw a swell show the first half. No kiddin'—you're improvin' right along. Maybe next season you'll make the grade with the big boys. No hard feelin's, kid, if we start bearin' down this period?"

"No hard feelin's," Charlie retorted with a good-natured grin. "Tell those Jap mugs you're teamed up with to show some stuff. Me, I don't sleep well at night without some exercise, you know."

"Sez you!" returned the Jap from Brooklyn. "That's okay by me, but let me slip it to you, guy, you won't need to count no sheep jumpin' fences to-night. We're goin' to quit nursin' you babes along, see?"

"Nurse this!" Charlie flashed a signal to his teammates.

Up went the leather for the opening scrimmage of the second half. As the ball left Referee Eckstein's hand, Charlie cut in behind his own center, drawing Adatchi with him. Everything depended upon the center jump and this time Shorty didn't fail him. He tapped to Charlie who pivoted neatly, barely avoiding a held-ball play with the close-guarding Jap.

Far down the court Zip Young was breaking for a corner, sucking in his guard. Shorty feinted left. The center lane was clear, save for Monk Leeming, who was zooming down the middle two full steps ahead of his man.

Charlie looped a long pass over Adatchi's clutching fingers. It was tagged for Monk near the foul, and Monk aimed to be there. He was. Monk Leeming was a tough man to stop, once he set his heart on getting somewhere. Fast for a big man, he reached the spot a step ahead of Zip Young's guard, who had darted from his corner to intercept the toss.

That was one more Orange Shirt out of luck. Monk got his hand on the ball and whipped a pass to Zip. The latter, quite unguarded, dribbled from the side for a short lay-up shot.

As the ball trickled through, Lee Leeming, who had sat like an image of white porcelain throughout the game, clapped her excited approval and even the two solemn Japanese gunmen beside her grinned appreciatively. Walter Watson, on the other hand, looked daggers at his prospective bride, and Charlie heard him curse under his breath. Zip's goal had looked so simple, so dead easy. Wally-Dear was not feeling so pleased with himself and his team just then. . . . Verily, the life of a sawed-off superman is a hard one on occasion, thought Charlie.

After that goal, the Orange Shirts threw caution to the wind and swarmed into the scoring zone with a five-man offensive. But the Fighting Five defense refused to buckle. Time after time, when a score seemed imminent, a Clarkville player bobbed up like a jack-in-the-box and ruined the effort. Now it was Monk, hurrying his Jap. Now it was Zip—now Charlie, or Shorty or Bull, worrying their men and dogging every step taken by their victims. If Adatchi closed in, Charlie was always parked on his tail, and if Charlie chanced to lose him, Zip picked him up. It was as pretty an exhibition of man-for-man defense as Lee Leeming had ever seen, but her discretion told her that silence in this case was golden and she refrained from showing her enthusiasm any more.

Charlie, continually on the lookout for a formation that would give them the chance to strike the blow for Lee and themselves, became first impatient, and finally, discouraged. It was difficult to play the game, signal plays and continually keep on the watch for the formation that would make his plan feasible. A nerve-racking business!

Finally after the ball had traveled the length of the court at least six times, with neither side tallying, Charlie was held in a furious mixup underneath his own basket. Then came a personal foul which meant a try for point, and a chance to break the scoring famine.

Charlie toed the line. The foul was undeniably a break for Clarkville's captain. And more, he was feeling the effects of the strenuous pace, for since the opening whistle he had been in the thick of almost every scrimmage. The rules permitted him to take ten seconds at the foul line, and although he could see that his orange-shirted opponents looked weary enough to drop, he took his time and made the most of the provision. The slight delay steadied him. Eyes riveted on the hoop, but his mind battling another problem, he spun the ball upward. It dropped through the netting without so much as grazing the metal.

Clarkville 23, Watson's 16.

Fourteen minutes left.

Back at center again, the lanky Jap pivot won the jump from Shorty Fiske and tapped one down the alley. Watson took it on the run and outwitted Brown with a crossover dribble. He flashed past Bull and before Monk could nail him, he slipped in a basket. That brought a momentary setback, but Zip struck back thirty seconds later with a long, arching goal from a difficult angle. The seven point lead was still intact.

Time out for Watson's Japs.

During the one minute rest, Monk's opponent was withdrawn from the lineup. His forward post was taken over by a pint-sized, rabbit-like Oriental who couldn't have weighed a hundred and twenty dripping wet.

Charlie, staring at the newcomer, was slightly puzzled by the substitution. The man taken out had played a whale of a game opposite Monk. The sub would also have to pair with Monk, who topped him by many inches and some fifty pounds in weight.

But the reason for the switch soon became apparent. When time was called, the new man set about worrying Guard Leeming as a fly worries a mastiff. Feinting, ducking, dodging, he soon had Monk engaged in a two-man duel of wits and speed. For at least two minutes this Jap sub never laid a hand on the ball. He was in there purely and simply to secure Monk's attention—to show him up, if possible.

And then, from a scrimmage beneath the W-J's basket, the substitute flashed in the clear. He spun round his guard, nabbed a pass from Watson, and angled in a goal . . . 25—20!

Charlie, who had now decided on the only plan possible, so far as the final fight was concerned, had turned his entire attention to Clarkville's making good in this game. But he was worried. A five-point lead isn't too safe when the enemy starts on a shooting spree—and Monk had looked bad on that one. The "rabbit," fresh as a daisy, had simply out-speeded him.

Fully aroused to the new danger, Charlie himself got back those points a moment later. On a center-tap play, the ball going to Bull Brown, Charlie and Zip worked a crisscross stunt deep in the forecourt. It shook the captain loose, and he took Bull's accurate peg a couple of steps from the basket. His shot rimmed the hoop, spun round and dropped through the netting . . . 27—20, with ten minutes left.

The W-J center won the toss from Shorty Fiske. The tap was Watson's, who rifled a pass to the ever-moving Jap sub. That speedster bluffed a shot to a brother Oriental, then dribbled fast to the right of Monk. The Clarkville guard caught off balance, leaped for his man.

Monk was all business this time. The little pest had made a show of him. That was all part of the gag, though Monk didn't know it at the moment. Racing through his mind was the picture of this Jap midget breaking free while he held the bag! Not a pretty view!

Spinning, he flung out an arm, intent on breaking up the dribble. He did. His paw descended on the forward's wrist; the ball flew out of bounds. All Japan grinned as the whistle piped!

The teams lined up, and the Jap scooter, still grinning, was given the ball for his try at goal. He missed the free toss, which removed his irritating grin and Shorty seized the leather underneath the hoop and passed it out of danger. But Zip, the receiver, walked with the ball and it was awarded to the Japs, out of bounds.

That was the signal for Bull Brown's opponent to reënter the contest in earnest. The sub speedster worked into the offensive again, now that he'd pulled his trick of tempting Monk to foul. Bull's man, though not so fast as his undersized teammate, was stronger and heavier and the two of them made a whirlwind pair, now that they'd got started on a bona fide offensive.

One after the other, they broke loose for two quick baskets. Clarkville 27, Watson's Japs 24. Charlie tossed in a long basket to give his team a five-point lead again, but two minutes later the husky Jap forward slipped past Bull to cage an easy lay-up shot. Clarkville 29, W-J's, 26.

Time was going fast, but not fast enough for the lads from Clarkville. Six minutes—and every one of them tuckered out. What with the first half of the Ridgetown championship game to their credit, the excitement of the kidnaping, the long drive and its subsequent adventures, and with only a scant five hours' sleep, it is no wonder they were drooping under

the red-hot pace forced upon them. They had hoped to tire these Japs, but actually the little men, tough as whipcord, had come on the court that morning perfectly fresh and fit, and even now, physically and mentally they were in far better shape than the team who had outplayed them all along. Imperceptibly Clarkville was slackening up, though every man jack was doing his utmost.

Bull, playing heroically under the basket, was attempting the impossible. He broke up many rallies, but try as he might, he couldn't be everywhere at once, and Monk, with his sister's plight forever torturing him seemed to be breaking up fast. Up to the present the Fighting Five had done all the forcing. Now they were back on their heels, battling gamely to avert a rout.

All five of them felt rotten and leg-weary, and they felt worse when the husky Jap forward ducked past Bull and shot in a goal with four minutes left to play . . . 29—28, Clarkville still leading!

Then Charlie managed to cage a tough one which built up the lead to a scant three points. But gloom fell again, the gloom of impending defeat, when Adatchi stormed down for a sizzling goal and was fouled as he shot.

Under the ruling the goal counted, and Adatchi was awarded one free throw. The Clarkville Five held their breath as the Orange Shirt sighted for the all-important toss. A point would tie the score. The ball looped up and whisked through the net. The count was knotted, 31—all!

Charlie, captain of his team before anything, was frantic. He called for time, driven to the move that all but exhausted his meager stock of tricks.

"Take my spot," he told Leeming. "I'll tail that sub. I think maybe Bull and I can stop 'em, Monk."

"We need a scorin' punch," Zip Young objected. "With you in the back court, Charlie—"

"We *got* a scorin' punch," the captain snapped. "You're not a tailor's dummy, Zip."

Time in again. Two minutes left. The score tied up.

Shorty Fiske, rocketing off the floor, tapped the ball to Charlie, now in a guard position. Captain Minor made a gallant save as Bull's husky Jap cut in to intercept. Fearful of a held ball with this big Oriental, Charlie took no chances. He back-bounced to Bull, and Bull scorched the leather cross-court to Shorty.

"Down!" yelled Charlie. "Everybody *down*!"

He streaked past the center line, closely followed by Bull Brown. Shorty smoked a pass to the captain and whirled along the sideline. Charlie tossed to Monk, Monk to Bull, Bull to Zip—and the forward back to Charlie. As Monk said later, if there'd been a crowd watching, they'd have gone "coo-coo". For this was the stuff the fans loved to see—Clarkville's famous short-passing, quick-cutting, five-man offense that had broken the back of many a tough opponent in the closing moments.

Charlie blocked, suddenly pivoted and dribbled toward the sideline. Folly? Maybe. But the pack swept his way like hounds after a fox. Suddenly out of nowhere Zip streaked for the basket. Charlie left his feet and twisting in the air, he hooked a long pass that sailed above the fingers of the lunging Japs and into Zip's eager arms.

A single step, a hasty shot, the plunk of leather as it met the board, a gasp from Lee and her bodyguard above, then a wild cheer from the excited girl. Zip had scored!

That gave the Fighting Five a two-point lead. In the minute or so remaining, it was strictly up to the Japs.

But even yet, the big supply of thrills was not exhausted.

Desperate, the Jap center won the jump from leg-weary Fiske. He tapped the ball to Adatchi, who dribbled easily around the exhausted Monk. And Adatchi ambled toward the center line, completely free.

Charlie steeled himself for the inevitable: if no one moved to get him, Adatchi would dribble for an easy basket. Monk was far behind and if Charlie or Bull tried to cover, one or other of the Jap forwards would wriggle loose. A *mighty* sweet spot—when a goal from the field would tie up the count!

Bull bottled his man, and Charlie did some split-second thinking. Adatchi wasn't a basket-hawk. The chances were that he'd rather pass to the "rabbit" than try to make the points himself. The pair were converging on him now, the "rabbit" on one side, Adatchi on the other. Charlie gambled—knowing the penalty if he flopped. He bluffed a start for Adatchi, then dropped back suddenly to guard against a pass.

Adatchi took the bait. As Charlie feinted in, the Brooklyn Jap made a high, swift toss which Charlie intercepted by a great, leaping catch.

The middle lane was clear. The "rabbit" was behind, Adatchi to the side. With a furious dribble, Charlie was in the clear, leaving in his wake the "rabbit," Adatchi and the big Jap forward, who paired off with Bull Brown. Up in the forecourt, Shorty, Monk and Zip scampered for the basket.

Menaced near the foul line, Captain Minor flipped to Monk, then circled his would-be blocker, Watson, and nabbed a quick return pass. Another Orange Shirt lunged and Charlie let fly. That ball had *goal* written on its cover. Dropping straight down, it sifted through the net for the points that iced the game.

A four-point lead was plenty good now. Clarkville 35, Watson's Japs 31.

Then the whistle blew. The game was over.

Charlie came back to earth with a bang. Basketball had blinded him to all necessities save that of beating these kidnapers in their home gym. He took a quick survey and saw that the fellows, knowing that their own special and private fight must be now or never, were surreptitiously closing in on their individual opponents.

Captain Minor took a deep breath. "*NOW!*" he yelled and jumped for his man.

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## CHAPTER XV

### "—THE HECK OF A NOTE!"

Charlie turned to paste his man—and the man was not there. The "rabbit" and his four teammates had dropped flat on the floor and were lying motionless.

For a moment Clarkville's captain stared down at his recumbent opponents in amazement. Then he saw the reason for their odd behavior. A machine gun had been run out of a doorway below the gallery. He and his own teammates were directly within the line of fire.

"Hard luck, Clarkville!" Referee Eckstein spoke from beside the gun. "We've been looking for some sort of a grandstand play from you chaps all through the game. When you make your plans for a getaway after this, Captain Minor, it would be well to remember that although walls do not always have ears, transoms are excellent loud speakers. Mr. Watson and I are not quite the saps you took us for. We had the pleasure of listening to your rather unique speech to your teammates before the game; from the locker-room passage. Naturally, we made provision against the—er—striking climax to this morning's sport that you proposed." The man's voice was like chilled steel.

"The Clarkville team will now go over to that bench and put on warming-up suits. We don't mind shooting you chaps, but we'd rather not have you die of pneumonia first.—*March!*"

Under such circumstances argument was not in order. The Fighting Five marched.

As he got into his clothes, Charlie watched Watson and his Japs rise to their feet and disappear through the doorway behind the machine gun. Lee Leeming had vanished. Evidently she had been whisked out of the gym by her bodyguard at the first sign of trouble.

It was a discouraged party of basketballers who presently traipsed along the locker room corridor under guard. Charlie, with a Jap beside him, was leading the procession. He had begun to mount the back stairs from the servants' hall when he heard a scuffle in the rear, a door slammed and there was the click of a lock.

"Monk's got away!" called Shorty Fiske. "He's beat it down the passage to the garage."

"Much good that will do," Charlie said bitterly to Zip who was next in line. "He can't go out in this weather without freezing to death—and these ginks will nab him in five minutes anyway."

"Sure," agreed Zip, "what do you s'pose is the big idea?"

"Honorable gentlemen will please refrain from conversation," cut in a voice and the procession moved on up the stairs.

Charlie's armed guard motioned him into the bedroom he had left about an hour earlier, shut and locked the door on the outside. The Clarkville captain seated himself on a radiator and hastily considered his position and that of his friends. Despite the pass key which Lee had given him and which he remembered he had not yet tried on his door, the outlook was far from satisfactory. It was now about seven o'clock and still dark outside. Within an hour or so Lee would either be made a bride against her will or—she would use the pistol on herself as she had threatened. Unless her escape could be contrived in the meantime. Her room, she'd told him, was on the third floor, above his own. To reach her he would have to pass through well-lighted halls, up a flight of stairs and then attempt to enter a door that would certainly be locked.

Still, he was now established in the house, and not wandering about in the snow. He was a prisoner—but there was that key! Springing up, he recovered it from a trousers pocket. At the door he stopped and listened.

Voices in the corridor—Monk's voice in argument. So he'd been recaptured. Of course he had. And now he was being taken to his room. Foolish of him to risk a bullet on such a hopeless chance. Returning footsteps passed the door and Charlie waited another ten seconds or so before trying it.

Then—hurray!—the key worked. Slowly and very carefully he opened the door on a crack and looked out. On doing so, it is only fair to say that Captain Minor swore under his breath. Seated on a chair before a door farther down the hall was a Jap reading a magazine. Then and there Charlie gave up any hope of receiving aid from the other fellows. They were locked in their suite and guarded, and for all of him, they must stay locked up. He closed his door and locked it again with his precious key.

Then he remembered the fire escape that Lee had told him ran outside his own window. He drew aside the curtains, let up the shade, but could see nothing. He raised the window sash. The snow was side-slipping earthward, whipped by sharp gusts of wind that penetrated to the marrow. Directly before him were not the iron bars he had been prepared for but thick steel wire netting crusted with snow and holding him a prisoner just as efficiently as any iron bars. But of a fire escape there was no sign at all.

This was a blow. For a minute he felt blue as indigo. Then he realized that it was quite probable that Lee, when speaking of her room, had meant that it was on the floor above his—but at the rear of the house, rather than directly above his own.

He closed the window on the arctic blast and stood for a moment deep in thought. Time, of course, was an all-important factor. On the other hand, these clothes would be a dead give-away if he were caught sight of outside his room.

Stripping off his basketball togs, he made for the bathroom, took a quick shower, and then got hastily into his own clothes. His ulster caught his eye and he put that on. In a pocket he found his woolen skating cap. That would come in handy if they got outside—he corrected himself—*when* they got outside! Lee must be rescued now at all costs. Somehow they must scale the wall. Not an easy program, but why worry about crossing bridges till they came to 'em?

Rapidly he reviewed each course of action. There were several, but to follow any one to success, he saw that he must gain a better knowledge of the interior of the house. Somehow, he must find a means of escape other than by the main staircase and the front door. At least he did know of the servants' stair, and then maybe the fire escape would materialize after all. . . .

Once more Charlie unlocked his door with the pass key and peered cautiously into the hall. The Jap was still seated in the chair in front of the fellows' door, but now the chair was tipped back against the panels, the magazine had slid to the floor, and the tired guard was dozing. Charlie hesitated no longer. He opened the door, slipped through, closed it softly after him and hurried along the hall in the opposite direction toward the main staircase.

The upper part of the house was sunk in silence, but rising from the entrance hall came the voices of Watson and Eckstein. And mixed with their voices, he heard the clink of ice in glasses. A reassuring sound. Apparently they were lingering over their drinks. So far as they were concerned, then, the coast was clear.

Keeping close to the wall, Charlie ran lightly up the stairs to the third floor, followed the hall back to the rear wing. Here he was confronted by three closed doors, one leading to a room approximately above his own, he judged, another at the end of the hallway, and still another door directly opposite the first. This floor was not arranged like the one below, which was the probable reason for Lee's misstatement about the location of her prison.

He saw that the first two doors were each fastened on the outside by bolts and a spring lock, and that the key to each lock was in place. The fact moved him with indecision. If he took possession of the keys, he could enter the rooms when he liked, and there was a good chance that Lee was in one of them. On the other hand, if the loss were discovered, an alarm would be raised, and then he would be found out. The very purpose he had in view might be killed. And he must be sure of a means of exit from this house before he dragged Lee into further danger. He decided that the keys would serve him where they were as well as in his pocket, and turned his attention to the third door. This was not locked, and from its position, he guessed it must be an entrance to a servants' stairway.

Seizing the knob confidently, he pushed the door open and, to his delight, found on the dark, narrow landing, an iron ladder that led upward to a trapdoor. He could hardly restrain a cheer. If the trapdoor were not locked, he had found a third line of retreat by the roof, far superior to any other possibilities.

He stepped out onto the landing, shutting the door behind him. In utter darkness he climbed the ladder and with eager fingers felt for the fastenings of the trap. He had feared to find a padlock, but to his huge relief his fingers closed upon two bolts. Noiselessly and smoothly they drew back in their sockets. Under pressure of his hand the trapdoor lifted. Through the opening swept a cloud of snow and the frigid breath of the wind.

Charlie hooked one leg over a round of the ladder, then with hands free, he moved the trap to one side. An instant later he scrambled to the roof, and after carefully replacing the trap rose and looked about him. To his satisfaction he found that the roof on which he stood ran level with the roof of the main building and of the wing which jutted out parallel with the so-called guest wing at the other end of the long narrow house.

"If there's another fire-escape over there," he thought, "that will be an even better way of getting down. Not such a chance of being spotted from inside the house while we're on our way."



He also considered that running over roofs in the dark, even when their pitfalls were not concealed by deep snow, was awkward exercise for a girl. And he decided that before they made their dash for freedom, the part of a careful jockey would be to take a preliminary canter over the course. Accordingly, among brick walls, rain-pipes, chimney-pipes and telephone wires, not to mention an aerial that nearly beheaded him, Charlie felt his way over to the roof of the gym. There he eventually discovered a fire escape leading down on the far side, and with a clearer idea of the obstacles to be avoided, he raced back to the starting-point.

Next, to discover the exact position of Lee's fire escape, he dropped to his knees and crawled through the snow to the rear edge of the roof. The light from back windows of the third floor showed him an iron ladder from the edge of the roof to the platform of the fire escape, and the platform itself, stretching below the windows the depth of the wing. He sighed happily—then groaned. The windows on the fire escape were closely barred.

At first he was puzzled to find a reason for providing a fire escape at a barred window from which no exit was possible, then realized that the bars must only lately have been attached. Probably only since Lee Leeming had been made a prisoner.

But now he was nearer that prisoner than he had been since he encountered her last night. . . . How long ago that seemed now! . . . There was much more risk in reaching her from the hall below, for there, though by turning a key he could enter her room, he would be in constant danger of discovery on his approach. From the fire escape he could at least talk to her through the barred window, and safely warn her that help was at hand.

Grasping the sides of the ladder, he dropped to the snow-covered platform. The first window was barricaded with trunks and boxes—a storeroom. Disregarding it, he passed quickly to the next two. Linen shades were lowered at both of these, but luckily, the lower sash of the middle window was raised a few inches, for ventilation. Kneeling on the platform and pressing his face against the bars, he brought his eyes level with this opening. The drawn shade prevented him from seeing into the room, and at first he could not hear a sound. Then above the whine of the wind, he heard the peaceful ticking of a clock, and the rattle of coal falling to the fender. But there was no sign that the room was occupied. It was just possible that Lee was not there, that he was mistaken after all. But—he must know!

If he slipped his hand through the bars and raised the shade, it might have disastrous results. If Lee were alone, and startled, she might not have sufficient self-control to stifle an outcry; or, if she were guarded—an alarm would be sounded immediately and all would be lost.

A tricky business, but Charlie was determined to take a chance. He *had* to see behind that shade. . . . Thrusting one hand between the bars he caught the end of the blind, pulled it gently and let the spring roll it up.

Through an opening of six inches the room lay before him. He saw a door leading to another room at one side, an upholstered couch, and then, in front of the coal fire, and facing in his direction, Lee, seated in a deep armchair. A book lay on her knees and she was reading absorbedly. Charlie stared at her in delight, hardly daring to credit his sight. What a break—she was there, and alone!

As he watched her, she stirred, closed the book, and leaning forward, rested her chin in the hollow of her hand and stared into the fire. Her attitude and look were completely dejected. Charlie didn't hesitate any longer. At any moment some one might enter from the other room, and then the rare chance that offered would be gone.

Not daring to speak or to attract her attention by any sound, he took one of his woolen gloves from his coat pocket, and with a jerk, tossed it through the narrow opening. It fell almost at her feet. The slight sound it made in landing on the rug caused her to start and turn her head. With every nerve taut, Charlie watched her through the window.

She sat motionless, staring at the glove, an expression of alarm and bewilderment on her pretty, pale face. Then suddenly, she looked quickly about her, then straight at the open window . . . Charlie's face was streaked with soot and snow, a lock of hair was plastered across his forehead, his eyes were wild with excitement. But at sight of this fearsome apparition, Lee remained perfectly calm. Her alert mind had in a flash grasped the significance of the glove and recognized the face at the window. Swiftly she rose to her feet, crossed the room and sank upon her knees at the sill.

"Oh, please be careful," she breathed, "if they see you, they'll shoot you. Speak in a whisper. . . ."

What a sport! Charlie gazed at her admiringly—cool as an icicle and her first thought was for him—his safety—not her own. He saw her for the first time, not a mere stranger—not only as Monk's sister in peril—but as a courageous, level-headed girl and a darned pretty girl, at that, who needed his help and was going to get it. In that instant, Charlie went back a few centuries, and became the knight-errant of old, rescuing beauty in distress from a dungeon cell.

But he was also a modern knight-errant. He wasted no time in explanation or pretty speeches.

"In two minutes," he whispered, "I'll unlock your door, if luck's still with me—and I guess it will be. There's a ladder to the roof on the servants' staircase to the right of your door—and the rest's easy. If anything goes wrong, I'll come back here. So wait at the window until you see your door open. All straight?"

Lee answered with an eager nod. This hopeful news had brought the color back to her cheeks and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"And put on a coat and some arctics, if you've got 'em. No time to lose, either."

"All right," she whispered. "I'll be ready."

Then the knight-errant ran up the fire escape, pulled himself over the edge of the roof, and crossing it, dropped through the trap to the landing of the kitchen stairs. Here he spent the greater part of the two minutes he'd allowed himself in cautiously opening the door into the hall. He accomplished this without a sound, and in one step reached the door that held Lee Leeming a prisoner.

Slowly he drew back the bolts. Only the spring lock now barred him from her. With shaking fingers he turned the key, pushed the door gently open, and ran into the room.

And then behind him, within six feet of where he stood upon the threshold, he heard a heavy footfall. To Charlie it sounded like a bursting bomb. He swung on his heel and found the giant bulk of Eckstein blocking the door, his fierce eyes shooting fire over the barrel of a pistol.

"Don't move!" warned the secretary.

At the sound of his voice, Lee gave a cry and sprang forward.

"Go back!" commanded Eckstein. His voice was low and controlled but his face was white and contorted with rage.

Charlie had recovered from the shock of surprise. He, also, was in a rage—a rage of mortification and bitter disappointment.

"Don't point that gun at me!" he blustered.

The sound of hurrying footsteps and Walter Watson's deep voice echoed from the floor below.

"Have you got him?" he called.

Eckstein made no reply, nor did he lower his gun. When Watson was at his side, without turning his head, he asked in the same level tone:

"What shall we do with him?"

Watson's childish features flushed purple with fury. "I told you—" he began.

"Never mind what you told me. What shall we do with him now? He tried to steal her, you know."

"So I see." A malicious smile from the dwarf made Charlie long to get his hands on the little beast.

"Naturally you don't want the girl now that you've discovered her treachery," continued the secretary. "She persuaded you to kidnap her brother and his friends in the hope that they could outwit you and prevent the marriage."

"That is so," returned Watson slowly. "However, I don't intend that any one else shall have her."

"Then," Eckstein's voice quickened, "why not rid ourselves of them at once and make our getaway as we planned?"

"We'll have to put them all on the spot, then. Minor told the others about the plans before the game."

"Oh, suit yourself about the rest," said the secretary, "but leave Minor to me. This young whelp insulted me and no man or boy can do that and live!"

At first Charlie believed that they were simply trying to frighten him. No sane man would discuss murder with such bravado. But—and at the thought he felt a touch of real fear—*was either man sane?* It was not a pleasant outlook. There was an appreciable difference between a tussle with angry men and a fight to the finish with lunatics. From this new viewpoint Charlie regarded his adversaries with increased wariness. He watched them as he would a couple of mad dogs.

Eckstein moved his big body back out of the doorway, his automatic revolver still covering Charlie and Lee.

"I have not decided just exactly how and when we shall dispose of you," he told them, "so I shall consult with Mr. Watson outside this door. While we talk, you will be locked in. We can hear any move you make. If you raise the window, or call, I will open the door and kill you at once—you and that girl!"

With a quick gesture, he swung the door shut and the spring lock snapped. An instant later the bolts were noisily driven home.

When the second bolt shot into place, Charlie turned and looked at Lee.

"This is the heck of a note!" he said.

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# CHAPTER XVI

## BEHIND THE DOOR

Outside the locked door the voices of the two madmen rose in fierce whispers. But Charlie ignored them. With the swiftness of a squirrel caught in a cage, he darted on tiptoe from side to side, searching the confines of his prison. He halted close to Lee and pointed at the window.

"Ever tried to loosen those bars?" he whispered.

Lee nodded and in pantomime that spoke of failure, shrugged her shoulders.

"Say, by the way—where's your gun?"

"Gone. Number One took it from me when I tried to use it in the gym."

Charlie's sudden hope died as quickly as it had taken shape within his despairing brain. Under stress of his efforts to reach Lee he had forgotten all about the gun, only to remember it again when—But no use wailing. With a grunt he dismissed it from his mind and motioned toward the window-bars again.

"You say you tried to loosen them? What did you use?"

Lee destroyed this last chance with a shake of her head and a swift smile. "Scissors," she said, "but they found them and took them away."

Charlie looked at the open coal grate. "Where's the poker?"

"Oh, they took that too. I bent it trying to pry the bars. So they knew."

He gave her an appreciative glance, then turned his eyes to the door that led to the room adjoining. "Is that door locked?"

"No, it isn't," Lee told him. "But the door from that room to the hall is fastened like the other with a spring lock and two bolts."

"Your bedroom?"

"No, my maid's—better say my keeper's. I sleep on the couch."

"Fine way to keep a prospective bride," was Charlie's comment.

Cautiously he opened the door and peered into the next room. Except for an iron cot, a bureau and a chair, it was empty. Off it he saw a small bathroom.

"The maid," whispered Lee, "when she's on duty, leaves the door open so she can watch me. When she goes downstairs, she locks and bolts the hall door. Of course it's locked now."

"What's she like?"

Lee gave a shudder that seemed to Charlie sufficiently descriptive. Her lips tightened.

"She's not human," she said. "I begged her to help me, appealed to her in every way. Then I tried half a dozen times to get past her to the stairs."

"Well?"

She shrugged. "I'm still here."

Suddenly, with her hand on his shoulder, she turned him so he faced the cot.

"The spring—on that bed," she breathed jerkily, "rests on two iron rods. They're loose and can be lifted out. I planned to smash the lock, but I knew the noise would have brought Watson or Eckstein or their Japs on the run. But you could defend yourself with one of them, just the same. . . ."

Charlie had already run to the cot. He found the spring supported on bars of iron resting loosely in sockets at the head and foot. He raised the one nearer him, and then after a moment of hesitation, let it drop into place.

"Fine as a crowbar," he said, shaking his head in indecision, "but I just don't see how to use it. His automatic could shoot six times before I could swing that thing on him once. And if I have it in my hands when he opens the door, he'll shoot,

and he may hit you! I'll leave it where it is and he won't know I've got it in reserve. All the same, it may come in handy later on."

In complete disapproval Lee shook her head. Her eyes filled with concern.

"You must not fight either of them," she begged. "I mean, not for me. You don't realize the danger! Neither of those men is sane. They won't give you a chance. You've no right to risk your life—"

Charlie held up his hand in warning, jerked his head toward the door.

"They've stopped talking," he whispered.

Straining to hear, they leaned forward, but no sound came from the hall. Lee raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Do you think they've gone?" she breathed.

"If I *knew*," he protested, "we wouldn't be here!"

In answer to his doubt a smart rap as though from the butt of a revolver, fell upon the door. The voice of Eckstein spoke sharply.

"Hey, there, Minor!"

Before replying, Charlie drew Lee and himself away from the line of the door. He placed the girl with her back to the wall so that if the door opened she would be behind it.

"Yes?" he said.

"Watson and I," called Eckstein, "have decided how to dispose of you—of both of you. He has gone below to make preparations. I am on guard. If you try to break out or call for help I shall shoot you as I warned."

"And I warn you—" shouted Charlie, "if this young lady and I do not instantly leave this house, or if any harm comes to her, you will hang for it!"

Eckstein laughed jeeringly.

"Who will hang me?" he mocked.

"My friends will. They know by this time that I'm in this house."

"Bunk!" scoffed the secretary. "I know that you bribed the Japs to clear out through that traitor Number Two. But they will never go to the police on your account. They've vamoosed for good—that is, except the three who will never see daylight again. Those Japs are not looking for long sentences as kidnapers—"

This was news—but Charlie made no open comment. "Are you looking for a trip to state's prison?" he said aloud. "Don't be a fool, Eckstein! You know your only hope for mercy is to open that door and let us go free."

For over a minute he waited, but there was no answer from the hall. After another minute of silence, Charlie turned and looked inquiringly at Lee.

"Eckstein!" he called.

Again he waited, and again he called. Still no reply. He struck the door sharply with his knuckles. Instantly the voice of the secretary rang forth in an angry bellow.

"Keep away from that door!"

Charlie turned to Lee and bent his head close to hers.

"Now, why in thunderation did he do that?" he whispered. "Do you think he really wasn't there—or is he planning to sneak away in the plane with Watson and wants us to think that even if he *doesn't* answer, he's still outside the door?"

The girl nodded eagerly. "I'll bet he thinks we still have my gun. I think one of the Japs told him Number Two had given it to me. Watson's probably in the hangar now. Eckstein means to follow, but doesn't want us to take pot shots at them. If we only knew for certain!"

As if in answer to her thought, the voice of Eckstein called to them.

"Don't speak to me again," he warned. "If you do, I'll not answer—I'll shoot!"

Flattened against the wall, close to the hinges of the door, Charlie replied flippantly and defiantly.

"That makes conversation difficult, doesn't it?" he called.

There was a bursting report and a bullet splintered the door panel, spattered against the fire-place and fell tinkling into the grate.

"Hope I hit you!" roared the secretary.

Charlie bit his lip. Whatever happy retort may have occurred to him, the moment was not propitious for an exchange of repartee.

"Maybe now," jeered Eckstein, "you'll believe I'm in earnest!"

Charlie still resisted any temptation to reply. He grinned apologetically at Lee and shrugged his shoulders. Her face was white, but from excitement and not from fear.

"What did I tell you?" she murmured. "He *is* mad!"

Thoughtfully he glanced at the bullet-hole in the panel of the door. It was on a level with his heart. He looked at Lee. Her shoulder was on line with his own, and her eyes were following his.

"In case he does that again," he whispered, "we'll be more comfortable sitting down."

With their shoulders against the wall the two young people sank to the floor. Charlie was about to make some comment when he was interrupted by a faint report from the lowest floor, as though the back door had slammed sharply. Lee showed that she had also heard it.

"Walter Watson," she said, "making his getaway!"

"Maybe," answered Charlie.

The report did not suggest the slamming of a door to him, but he saw no reason for telling Lee. With his fingers locked across his knees, Charlie was leaning forward, eyes frowning, lips tightly shut. At his side the girl watched him. His broad shoulders, almost touching hers, his strong jaw projecting aggressively, and the alert, observant eyes gave her confidence.

"You know—" she began, but was suddenly halted by two sharp reports. They came from the room directly below them. It was no longer possible to pretend to misinterpret their significance.

"Good Lord!" Charlie gritted his teeth. "That was a rifle!"

They waited breathlessly for what might follow—an outcry from one of his teammates, the sound of a body falling, or a third rifle shot. But throughout the house there was silence.

"The fellows!" Charlie muttered. He got to his feet. "I think I'll try—"

Then a violent blow on the door was followed by the voice of Eckstein.

"You, Minor—" he growled. "Come to the door. Stand close to it so I needn't shout. Come, quick!"

Charlie made no answer. Motioning to Lee to remain where she was, he ran noiselessly to the cot in the other room, and lifted one of the iron bars from beneath the spring. Grasping it at one end, he swung the bar swiftly, as a batter tests the weight of a baseball bat. As a weapon it seemed to satisfy him, for he smiled. Then once more he placed himself with his back to the wall.

"Do you hear me?" roared Eckstein.

"Of course I hear you," retorted Charlie. "If you want to talk to me, open the door and come in."

"And be shot for my pains! No, thank you. Listen to me, if I open the door, you may act the fool. I have made up my mind to let you live. You will soon have this house to yourselves. In a few minutes I shall leave it with Watson, but first of all I must have that gun."

Charlie swung the iron club in short half-circles.

"Come in, then, and get it!" he invited.

"Don't trifle with me!" roared the secretary. "I may change my mind. Open the door yourself and hand the girl's revolver

through butt first."

"And get shot by you, eh? Where do you get that stuff, Eckstein! I haven't lost my senses—yet!"

"Then you will lose them very soon. If in one minute I don't see that gun I'll begin shooting through this door and neither of you will live."

Still keeping out of range Charlie rattled the doorknob with the end of the iron bar. An instant later there was a scream of exultation and on a line where Charlie would have been standing if his hand rested on the doorknob, three bullets splintered through the wood.

Lee caught Charlie by the wrist. Unheeding the attack upon the door, her eyes were fixed on the window. She pointed with her free hand, quivering with excitement. The shade was still raised a few inches, and they saw that the light of a new day had come. The storm was still raging, but now they could plainly see a number of outbuildings, probably stables, and near them a large airplane hangar. In the windows and doorways of these buildings, many men were gathered, still others were crouching in the shadows of the walls and behind trees and shrubbery in the snow.

With Lee at his side, Charlie sprang to the window and threw up the shade and the lower sash. As they clung to the bars, peering into the snowstorm, the light in the room threw their figures into sharp relief. And in an instant from the windows opposite, from the stableyard below and even from the roofs of the buildings came a savage, exultant yell of welcome, a confusion of cries, orders, entreaties, a great roar of warning. At the sound, Charlie felt the girl at his side tremble.

"What does it mean?" she cried.

Charlie laughed and gripped her arm. "Those basketballs I flung over the wall—or Number Two—or somebody—has raised the country, that's all!" he shouted jubilantly. "Those shots we heard—"

Lee stopped him with a low cry of alarm. She thrust her arm between the bars and pointed. In the yard below them the sloping roof of the kitchen stretched from the house to the wall of the stableyard. Above the wall from the yard beyond stood a ladder, and, face down upon the snow-packed roof, sprawling awry, were the motionless forms of two men. Their dark uniforms and visored caps proclaimed their office.

"State police!" exclaimed Charlie. "Those shots we thought were for the fellows in the house were for *them!*"

As he spoke a sudden silence fell, a silence as startling as the shout of warning. Some fresh attack upon the house was being made, which the prisoners could not see, but which must be visible to those in the buildings opposite.

"Maybe they're on the roof," whispered Charlie. "They'll be through the trap in a minute, and you'll be free!"

"No—look!"

She also spoke in a whisper as though she feared that Eckstein might overhear them. And then she pointed again. Above the top of the ladder, appeared the head and shoulders of a man. He wore a policeman's cap, but, warned by the fate of his comrades, he came armed. Balancing himself with his left hand on the rung of the ladder, he pointed a revolver with the other, apparently aiming at the two in the window. Lee sprang to one side.

"Stand still!" commanded Charlie. "He knows who *you* are and who I am. You heard that yell when they saw us. They know we're prisoners and they're glad we're still alive. That officer is aiming at the window *below* us. He's after the men who murdered his pals."

From the window directly beneath them came the crack of a rifle and the revolver of the police officer blazed in answer. Again the rifle crashed and the man on the ladder jerked his hands above his head and pitched backward. Charlie looked into Lee's face and found her eyes filled with horror.

"Watson," he stammered, "or maybe Eckstein—"

Even as he spoke the voice of the bearded secretary rose in a shriek from the floor below, but not from the window beneath them. The sound seemed to come from the front of the house, from one of the rooms facing the drive. In the awed silence that had suddenly fallen again, the maniac's shrieks carried sharply. They were more like the snarls and ravings of an animal than the outcries of a man.

"Take that!" he shouted, with a flood of oaths, "and *that*—and *that!*"

Each word was punctuated by the report of his automatic, and, to the amazement of Charlie, was answered immediately from the front by a scattering volley of rifle and pistol shots.

"The house is surrounded," he cried. "This isn't a fight, Lee, it's a battle!"

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## CHAPTER XVII

### BATTLE!

Men were building barricades below, barricades of tables and boxes and crates, from behind which rifles poked stealthily to send forth sudden flashes of flame. And these men, they saw, wore caps and overcoats of khaki.

"For Pete's sake!" Charlie cried incredulously, "they've called out the state militia!"

As unconcernedly as though facing the butts at a rifle-range, three sharp-shooters, lying in the open, were firing point-blank at the window below. Eckstein had evidently come to the rescue of his employer, for now the rattle of the machine gun joined in the war upon law and order.

Beside the three soldiers, on his knees in the snow, a young man in an officer's uniform was directing their fire. A brother officer stood in full view behind a low barricade directing other snipers, bending over them like a coach of a tug-of-war team, pointing with gloved fingers.

As the light grew stronger the two in the window could make out more officers huddled in the stable doorway and with them were inspectors of police, firemen in helmets and, wrapped in a fur coat, the well-known and beloved figure of Coach Parker. Charlie saw him step into the yard and wave his arm. At his bidding an automobile came sweeping into view, its two blazing eyes sending forth great, shafts of light.

The driver of the car wasted no time in taking up his position. Rolling halfway down the yard, he swiftly backed to the stable wall so that his headlights fell full on the house. Then Lee and Charlie saw that the car also carried a searchlight. The driver sprang out and in another moment the window below their own was bathed in bright rays.

Watson's hiding place was now as clearly exposed as though it were held in the circle of a spotlight. At the success of the maneuver a great cheer went up from below. But the triumph was brief. In a minute or two the blazing lamps had been shattered by bullets and the courageous driver limped to safety, evidently badly hit.

Charlie drew Lee back into the room.

"You're right, those men in the room below us have always been unbalanced," he told her. "Now they're mad as hatters and the sight of blood has made them raving maniacs. They know they have no chance to live. There's no fear or hope left to hold them and one life more or less means nothing. If they should come back here—"

He hesitated, but Lee nodded quickly. "I understand," she said.

"I'm going to try to break down the door and get to the roof. Our only hope is that this attack will keep them from hearing and—"

"No, no," she protested. "They *will* hear you, and they'll kill you—"

He grinned at her. "They may take it into their crazy heads to do that anyway, you know. So the sooner I get the good work in the better. I've only got to smash the panels close to the bolts, put my arm through and draw 'em back. And with one more blow on the spring lock when the firing's the loudest—we're in the hall. If anything happens to me, you must know how to make your escape alone. Across the hall is a door leading to an iron ladder. That ladder leads to an open trapdoor. When you reach the roof run toward the gym, and on the far side, you'll find the fire escape."

"I'm not going without you," she said quietly, "not after what you've done for me."

"I haven't done anything for you yet," objected Charlie. "But in case I get caught, I mean to make sure there will be others at hand who will."

He pulled his pencil and a letter from his pocket and wrote rapidly on the back of the envelope:

"I will try to get Miss Leeming up through the trap in the roof. You can reach the roof by means of the fire escape on the gymnasium wing. Send men to meet her."

In the group of officials half hidden in the stable doorway, he could make out the sturdy figure of Pop Parker, the coach.

"Pop!" he yelled. "Hey, Pop!"

Then as the Coach waved a reassuring arm, Charlie weighed the envelope with a coin and threw it into the air. It fell

close to the house, in full view, and at once the two madmen below splashed the snow around it with bullets.

But indifferent to the firing, a tall figure pushed past Coach Parker and dashed across the yard. He picked up the missive, deliberately turned and waved to Charlie, and raced back. Parker snatched the envelope from him and held it to the light.

"That was *Monk!*" exclaimed Lee in an excited whisper.

Charlie nodded. "Stout feller, Monk. And the other three are back there, too. I wonder how they made their getaway. But I mustn't waste more time."

He balanced his iron rod as he would a pole, and aimed it at the upper half of the door into the hall.

"When the next volley comes," he said, "I'll smash the panel."

With the bar raised high, his muscles straining, he stood alert and poised, waiting for a shot from the room below to call forth an answering volley from the besiegers. But no sound came from below. And the sharp-shooters, waiting for the madmen to expose themselves, held their fire.

Charlie relaxed and lowered his weapon. He looked inquiringly at Lee.

"What's *this* mean?" he demanded, instinctively dropping his voice to a whisper.

"That they're short of ammunition," she answered in a tone as low as his own, "or else they're coming here."

With a peremptory gesture, Charlie waved her toward the adjoining room and then ran to the window.

"Wait!"

Lee was leaning forward with her face close to the door. She held a finger to her lips. With the other hand she beckoned Charlie.

"Some one is moving in the hall," she murmured. "Do you think they're escaping by the roof? No," she corrected herself, "they seem to be running down the stairs again. Now they're coming back! Do you hear? It sounds like some one running up and down the stairs. What can it mean?"

From the direction of the staircase, Charlie heard a curious creaking sound of many light footsteps. He gave a cry of relief.

"The police!" he shouted happily. "They've come by way of the roof, and they're going to attack in the rear. You're *safe!*"

He sprang away from the door and with two swinging blows, smashed the broad panel. And then, with a cry, he staggered back. Full in his face, through the break he had made, swept a hot wave of burning cinders. Through the broken panel, he saw that the hall matting, the steps of the staircase and the stair-rails were wrapped in flame.

"The house is on fire! They've taken to the roof and set fire to the stairs behind them!"

With the full strength of his arms and shoulders, again and again he struck the iron bar against the door. But the bolts held, and through each fresh opening he made, smoke and burning cinders drawn by the draught from the windows swept into the room.

Then at last he was able to thrust his arm through the jagged hole and jerk free the upper bolt. An instant later he kicked the lower panel to splinters, withdrew the bolt, and under the savage onslaught of his iron bar, the spring lock flew apart.

On one side of the hall the burning staircase was a well of flame; at his feet, the floor matting lay a sheet of flickering tongues of fire. He raced into the bedroom, and returned carrying a blanket and a towel dripping with water.

"Hold it there!" He pressed the towel across Lee's mouth and nostrils.

Blinded by the bandage, she could see nothing, but she felt herself suddenly wrapped in the blanket and then lifted high in Charlie's arms. She gave a cry of protest, but the next instant he was running swiftly with her while the flames from the stair-well scorched her hair. All at once she was tumbled to her feet, the towel and blanket snatched away, and she saw Charlie hanging from an iron ladder, holding out his hand. She clasped it and he drew her after him, the flames pursuing and snatching at them hungrily.

The cold air smote her in the face, from hoarse throats below a yell of welcome greeted her and her rescuer, and Lee found herself on the roof, dazed and breathless, and free.

At the same moment, Pop Parker and Monk Leeming reached the second story window by way of the fire escape and

shielding their faces from the flames they gazed into the blazing room.

What they saw showed them that there were no lives to rescue. Stretched on the floor were the bodies of the two murderers. A bullet-hole in the forehead of both men showed that self-destruction and cremation had seemed a better choice than the gallows and a grave of quicklime.

And above, breathing in the fresh clean air of morning, two young people stood propping each other up against a chimney, half laughing, half crying in fatigue and joy. Running toward them across the roof, stumbling and slipping in the snow, were many blue and khaki-coated angels of peace and law and order.



# CHAPTER XVIII

## THE SECOND HALF

"And now, old chap," Coach Parker was saying, "I guess you'd better get up." He was sitting on the edge of Charlie's bed, and it was five-thirty in the afternoon. "Supper will be ready for the team at six-fifteen in the hotel dining room."

"Boy, and will I be glad to get it! I could eat a horse right now," Charlie grinned ruefully. "The last twenty-four hours was pretty stiff training for basketball, you know." Then he yawned. "But I certainly feel better for that all-day sleep."

"Well, you got a good start on it," returned Mr. Parker, his eyes twinkling. "All five of you—or rather six, counting Lee Leeming—slept like logs in the cars all the way back to the hotel."

"How is Lee—I mean, Miss Leeming?"

"Okay, according to Monk's report. Her family are here in the hotel with her. She's probably still asleep. That was a tough racket for a girl."

"Or for anybody." Captain Minor stretched his cramped limbs. "Did you hear how she happened to be kidnaped in the first place? I never got around to asking her."

"Why, I understand she was spending a weekend with a school friend. Some people dropped in for Sunday tea, and Watson was among them. As it happened, the school friend came down with the grippe that afternoon, ran a temperature and so forth—and Watson offered to drive Lee Leeming back to her boarding school. The man was mentally unbalanced, of course, though no one seemed to be aware of it, and unfortunately he took a violent fancy to Lee. Instead of driving her to school, he drove her to his house—which burned to the ground this morning, by the way. Then he phoned the school and her people that she had a bad sore throat and was remaining at her friend's for a few days."

"So everybody thought she was somewhere else."

"That's it."

Charlie was silent for a minute or so, then he said: "Nobody ever explained to me how the other fellows managed to get out of the house or how you happened to find us, Coach."

Parker smiled. "Explanations don't mean much to a fellow when he's sound asleep, you know. But now you've come out of your coma, I'll satisfy your curiosity. Remember that Monk made a break for the garage when you fellows were being taken to your rooms under guard after playing the game with Watson and the Japs?"

"Yes, I thought it was a fool stunt, but what—"

"Well, you see he was after a pair of wire clippers—and he got them!"

"What in the world—?"

"To cut the steel wire netting that barred their windows."

"Gosh! Why, of course—"

"And that's just what they did. We saw the four of them drop from the window sill into a bank of snow as we started to surround the house."

"Good stuff! And say, did somebody find one of the balls I chucked over the wall?"

Coach Parker shook his head. "No, it didn't happen that way. A police car scouring the country was stopped by a Jap, Number Two, I take it, just outside the gates. He showed them one of the basketballs and told them that you fellows and Miss Leeming were prisoners in Watson's house. Then before they could question him further, he disappeared into the storm."

"Good old Number Two!" exclaimed Charlie. "Hope he isn't caught."

"I think he's safe. None of the Japs have been apprehended so far, and I don't believe it's likely they will be. The little beggars cleaned Watson's garage of cars and probably made their several getaways in as many directions. As for the police car, it drove on to the nearest house and telephoned for help. That's about all there was to it. You know what happened after we got there and found the Japs flown."

Charlie nodded and yawned again. "And now I've got to get up and play off that second half with Ridgetown High!" he groaned.

"You fellows don't have to play it off to-night," the Coach told him, "but Ridgetown suggested it and the people expect it, and all arrangements have been made at the gym for eight o'clock start. Otherwise, Ridgetown will win the championship by default, and I can't see Clarkville allowing anything like that."

"You're darn tootin', Pop!" Charlie sat up. "We've got a two-point lead on 'em already. Score's fifteen to thirteen, isn't it?"

The Coach grinned happily. "It is. And the walls will bulge with the crowd that second half will pack into the gym to-night. You fellows turned into national heroes overnight, especially you, me lad! Snap into it, now—there are still more laurels to be won this evening."

Eight o'clock in the State College Gymnasium, and the shouting fans were still bent on giving Clarkville's Fighting Five the ovation of a lifetime.

The lineups were posted. For Ridgetown: Black and Chester, forwards; Captain Beekman, center; Ackley and McNutt, guards. For Clarkville: Minor and Young at their customary forward posts; at center, Fiske; in the back court, Leeming and Brown.

Just before the whistle, Charlie called his men around him. "Don't go on a foul-in' spree," he warned them. "Play 'em careful till we see how the wind's blowing. We don't know yet what kind of a deal we're in for."

Shorty Fiske outjumped Beekman and flipped the opening tap to Charlie. The captain dribbled, paused suddenly, and bluffed a shot at the hoop.

As McNutt left his feet to block the shot, Charlie bounce-passed to the agile Zip Young. Zip wasn't the slowest player in town, at that. He took Charlie's ball underneath the hoop and poured her through for a goal—17—13!

The roar of the crowd was nothing short of a symphony to Charlie's ears.

Beekman, rangy Ridgetown pivot, tried to pull a fast one on the next center jump. As the ball went up, he lurched into Fiske, tipping his rival off balance. But Beekman outsmarted himself. The ump caught him; so did half the crowd. There wasn't any overlooking that one. Personal foul.

Fiske, something of an eagle-eye on free throws, stepped to the foul line. His ball rimmed the hoop and dropped through the net-strings, 18—13.

The Shooting Stars tightened up. They didn't like this increased Clarkville lead—not a little bit, they didn't. In the next few minutes they caged two baskets, both made by Black, the right forward, and bringing the score to Clarkville 18, Ridgetown 17.

And then after Shorty had again lost the tip-off, Charlie suddenly emerged from a wild scrimmage beneath the Stars' basket, and with him came the leather. Far down-court, just inside the end line, he saw Zip waving frantically. Charlie let fly with the longest heave of the evening.

That caught the Stars napping. Zip took the pass unguarded, only a step from his own hoop. Laughing, he whipped in a goal, while the fans, between cheers, snickered audibly. Zip Young had scored on the basket-hanger play, a trick so ancient that it fairly reeked of moth-balls—20—17!

Time out for the Stars.

"Those hoboes are due for a comeback," Monk remarked to Bull. "Something tells me this fight is just beginning."

In a sense Monk was right, for the Stars certainly put on more pressure. Chester slipped away from his man and caged a basket, and a minute later Ackley nabbed a free throw on personal foul from Clarkville's captain. After he ringed it, the count was tied at 20—20; even then the Stars kept right on going.

Fighting savagely, Black shook Bull and cut to take a short pass from Chester near the basket. The lad made it good, too, and now the Stars led, 22—20.

By this time the fans were pop-eyed. But despite their prejudice in Clarkville's favor, they were fair. Each score was met with thunderous applause. Down on the floor, Charlie Minor didn't have time to measure that cheering, but it quickened his pulse to hear it just the same.

Time had wings to-night. Minutes passed with the swiftness of seconds. Fourteen, sixteen, nineteen—

Back yonder, when the half was young, Black's goal had given his team a two-point lead, 22—20. But now, with a minute left—after a thrilling spree of scoring that had kept the fans in tumult—the score was tied at 31—all. Four different times the lead had changed possession since the middle of the half. Anything could happen, but time was dissolving like a soap-bubble.

Held ball had just been called on Zip and Ackley in Clarkville's front court. Charlie arranged his men; the ball was tossed between the two contestants. Zip Young, for the second time that night, proved the better jumper. He side-tapped to Shorty, and the latter, dribbling past the leg-weary Beekman, whipped in a basket. The Fighting Five were leading!

"We're in," said Charlie. "Hold the ball as long as you dare, and everybody cover if they grab it."

Monk nabbed the tip-off in the back court. He passed the ball to Bull and Bull passed it back. Shorty Fiske cut in to take a throw from Leeming. But under the provisions of the ten-second rule, Clarkville was obliged to take the sphere across the center mark. Fiske rifled it into the front court, aiming for Charlie.

But the Clarkville captain never laid his hands on the leather. McNutt, cutting in suddenly, batted down the pass and instantly recovered. A herd of Stars at once stampeded for their own basket. Four went down, overwhelming Monk and Bull by the swift attack. McNutt slipped a short pass to Black; the forward shot, the ball zipped through. The score was tied again!

Seconds later the gun cracked.

An overtime battle! An extra period needed.

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All too soon they were at it again, hammer and tongs. Now the play was moving in a different vein, both teams struggling for possession of the ball, both afraid to lose it. Two boxers, fearing each other's wallop and sparring for an opening!

For more than three minutes neither team really threatened. The guarding was close. There weren't many breaks for the basket. The few long shots—mostly from mid-court—failed to ring the bell.

And then, with exactly ninety seconds to go, Chester suddenly streaked down-court to take a pass from Beekman. Bull coming up hard, met him with a bang. The whistle shrilled. A personal foul on Bull Brown.

Charlie's heart sank like a lead weight. Down in his bones he felt that Chester was going to sink that goal. If he did, the tie would be broken.

Chester sank it. The Shooting Stars were leading by the margin of a point!

Captain Minor didn't call out time. His mates knew the story, just as he did. They had to score. To score, they had to grab that ball!

Fiske got the tap, but Ackley intercepted. Now the Stars, scenting victory, strove to ice it by a three-man attack in the front court. Ackley and McNutt, the guards, hung back as safety men. Desperate, the Fighting Five ganged the attackers and finally won back the ball, only to see it batted down by Ackley when a pass from Monk went wild. The Stars' ball again and only seconds left.

Ackley stalled as long as he could and finally aimed a toss at Chester. But he reckoned without Bull Brown. Bull, tearing in madly, spiked the ball deep in his own back court. Gambling, he heaved a blistering pass to Charlie who was free near the center circle.

Charlie pivoted. There wasn't a Clarkville man within yards of the basket.

He poised himself for a long set shot. The ball left his hands. An instant later the gun barked.

But the goal counted, if made.

The ball arched high, in a long, perfect arc. It caromed off the board, angled toward the hoop, struck against the rim. Pandemonium burst from the massed spectators.

The ball had dropped through the netting!

But on the floor an argument was raging. Beekman, Ridgetown center and captain, was pointing at Charlie.

"He ran with the ball!" Beekman screamed. "He ran before he shot. That's a violation. The goal doesn't count!"

Charlie knew he hadn't traveled with the leather. But if Todd, the ump, or Knapp, the ref, should agree with Beekman—

Todd said nothing. It was entirely up to Knapp.

"No violation!" the referee snapped promptly. "Watched him all the way. Goal counts!"

Charlie nearly fainted with relief. The crowd went wild. The Fighting Five had won the State Championship!



"Where you going?" Monk turned on Charlie as that breathless young man started toward one of the stands. "Stick around, you Conquering Hero! They're going to present the Cup to you right here on the floor in half a minute."

Charlie kept traveling. "Lee's calling me," he flung back over his shoulder. "The Cup can wait!"

**THE END**

[The end of *The Fighting Five* by Noel Sainsbury Jr.]