

THE
BIG LEAGUER

By

WILLIAM HEYLIGER



The
Goldsmith Publishing Company
CHICAGO

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. MARTY GAGE, PUPIL

II. MARTY DECIDES

III. BAD DAYS

IV. MARTY TAKES A HARD ONE

V. MARTY FACES THE GUN

VI. SPARKY GETS A CALL

VII. FALTERING STEPS

VIII. MARTY MAKES A PROMISE

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CHAPTER I Marty Gage, Pupil

It was, Marty Gage thought, as he awakened in his sunny room on the fifth floor of the Spaulding House, a rather pleasant and unusual circumstance to be the son of the manager of a big-league team. Rather pleasant, indeed.

The sun played along a corner of his bed and he stretched luxuriously. You slept until you were in the mood to arise. Except for those stretches when the Panthers were at home, and losing, and his father called morning batting practice, there was nothing to be done until you went to the ball park at two o'clock. You went down into the dining-room three times a day and ordered anything on the menu you fancied. All through the long, summer vacation, you traveled with famed heroes of the diamond and rubbed elbows with them on the bench.

Sparky Woods might go to his summer camp in Maine. Jimmy Blake could have his two adventurous months on a Great Lake freighter. Joe Tuthill was welcome to his fishing trip to the Gulf of Mexico. Give him, Marty reflected, baseball.

Almost every day--unless there was rain, or wet grounds, or a long train jump, or an off-day in the schedule--you sat on the snarling, fighting bench of a snarling, fighting team that took its baseball seriously. And if you were lucky enough to be the catcher of your prep school team, and if the great Buck Olsen was your particular buddy, then you were sitting right in the lap of Lady Luck.

The telephone rang. The boy yawned and enjoyed another stretch. The bell rang again, longer and more insistently. He squirmed out of the comfortable bed.

"Bill." a voice asked.

"My father's not here," said Marty.

"Is that you, Marty?" the voice asked quickly. "This is Joe Farrant, of the

Herald-Trib. How about a Sunday feature?"

"About what?"

"About you. The boy who sees baseball from the bench of the Panthers."

"Nix!" said Marty.

"Oh, come on, Marty, loosen up and talk. You're the only manager's son touring the circuit. Every kid in the country envies you. How about giving us a little inside dope and a spread of pictures? What it feels like to sit right smack in the heart of a game? What happens on the bench during a rally or when one of the Panther's pitchers is being slaughtered?"

"Nothing doing," said Marty with decision, and hung up.

His father had warned him about that. And the warning had been emphatic and unmistakable.

"The sports writers will be after you, Marty," Silent Bill Gage had cautioned. "They'll flatter you, and ooze around you, and try to get you to talk. In an unguarded moment you might say something, innocently, that some writer would garble, and after that the fat would be in the fire. I've seen more than one baseball war started by an innocent remark. They call me 'Silent Bill.' I've earned the title. I've been twenty years in baseball and I've never had to go around apologizing for something I've let slip. I don't let anything slip. I've done pretty well keeping my tongue right where it belongs--between my teeth."

Marty had not forgotten.

Newspapers, opened at the sports pages, were scattered around his father's rumpled, unoccupied bed. Marty gathered them up, smoothed them out, and went across the room to a deep chair near one of the windows. What had the baseball writers said about yesterday's slaughter? A game the Panthers had figured was right in the bag. He scanned the first paper and a two-column head of jubilant black type caught his eyes. He read judiciously:

VAUNTED PANTHERS SLIP AS
"DYNAMITE" HUB WATSON FAILS
TO STOP RAMPAGING SHARKS

"Silent" Bill Gage who, according to report, has spoken only six words since he was born, must have felt like breaking a life-time rule yesterday at Sportsman's Park and talking right out in public, loud and violently. The Silent One arrived in town with his team needing a victory if they were to hold a precarious hold on second place. He picked his ace pitcher, "Dynamite" Hub Watson to sink a harpoon into the Sharks. Alas and alack! The Sharks, who are no respecters of ace pitchers when they are in the mood, were in the mood yesterday. They made a toothsome meal of the mighty Hub.

The score was 7 to 3 and, as a result of the defeat, the Panthers dropped back into third place. Hub, who leads the league in games won, turned in a poor performance. The Hub Watson curve was missing and the famous "Dynamite" speed simply wasn't there. Probably it wasn't Hub's day. Silent Bill yanked his big right-hander in the fifth. But by that time the Sharks had seven runs, and seven was four runs more than was needed to win.

The telephone rang again. A voice, harsh and husky from much riding of opposing batters and much pleading with the temperamental pitching staff of the Panthers, said:

"What's the matter, kid?"

"Nothing, Buck. Why?"

"No feed bag this morning?"

"With you in ten minutes," Marty cried.

"O. K. I'll time you."

"Watch my smoke," Marty grinned. He slapped down the receiver, kicked newspapers to one side and bolted for the bath-room peeling off his pajama coat as he went.

Ten minutes later--ten minutes to the second--the elevator let him out at the lobby.

Buck Olsen leaned jauntily against the desk talking to one of the room-clerks. A big man, Buck, tall and rangy, with the slim waist of the athlete and the gnarled right hand of a catcher who had had more than one finger broken by foul tips. Marty strode quickly across the lobby floor.

"A letter for you, Mr. Gage," the clerk said, and slipped it out of the room box.

The letter, Marty saw after a glance at the handwriting, was from Sparky Woods. He thrust it into his pocket. Sparky Woods was his battery mate; and yet a letter from Sparky had to wait when Buck Olsen stood ready to go through with the skull practice--the baseball drill--that was part of almost every morning's routine.

Together they crossed the wide lobby to the dining-room. Though the red-haired boy was dwarfed in stature by the black-haired man, they seemed to be cut a bit from the same identical mold. Buck Olsen walked with the careless swagger of one grown used to the camera's eye and the hero-worshipping applause of the crowd--and Marty Gage's stride was a studied, exact copy of Buck's. They made one think of an eagle and a game-cock only, instead of trying desperately to escape, the game-cock tried to imitate the eagle. Hero and hero-worshipper!

A dozen of the players were breakfasting together--trim, bronzed, lean men

marked by a certain nervous vitality. Benson, the outfielder, stopped them.

“Where do you get your drag, Buck?”

Buck grinned. “What drag?”

“The score-keeper gave you a hit on that poke to short. If it had been played cleanly you’d have been out a mile.”

“Boy,” said Buck, “they may nip me on a close one but I’m never out a mile.”

Marty was conscious of his father watching him inscrutably.

They found a table and ordered without glancing at the menu. When a ball club pays the bill a player does not have to figure cost; and Marty, as Bill Gage’s son, was carried as a guest.

“Pretty nearly time, isn’t it,” Buck asked, “for you to hang up your spiked shoes? How much longer you got?”

“A week,” Marty told him. “School is due to open next Wednesday.”

“Looks like you’ll miss the Chicago series, eh?”

Marty sighed.

“You won’t be missing much. We ought to take three out of four. Hodge’s the king-pin of their infield and ever since he smeared up his ankle the inner works have been shot. Take it from me, they’ll be pickings. Well, after all I’ve learned you this summer you ought to be able to go back there and kick things wide open. What’s the name of this school of yours?”

“Arrowhead.”

“Yes; that’s it. Arrowhead. Funny, I ain’t much on names. Tell me a name tonight and maybe tomorrow it’s gone. But let me see a batter go up once. That’s all, once. After that I’ve got his ticket as long as he stays in the league. You ought to go back to this Arrowhead school and burn them up.”

Marty found the prospect alluring. After all, why not? How many prep school players had big-league training? If he didn’t shine among the preps he’d be a dud.

Buck drank his orange juice and cleared a space on the table. “Ready, kid?”

“Let’s go.”

“O. K. Yesterday those birds got two fast ones in the first. Remember?”

Marty nodded.

“Why? Got the answer?”

Marty knitted his brows. “Schultz had fanned and Lake had popped. There were two down and men on second and third. You called Hub down for a talk.”

“Who was up?”

“Powell.”

“How does Powell hit?”

“Nine times out of ten to right field unless he’s facing a slow-ball pitcher and then he’s apt to hit to center or to left.”

“Why to center or left on a slow ball?”

“Because he hits late on a fast ball, and on a slow ball he meets it more out in front.”

“All right. You remember what you’re told, don’t you? Now, why shouldn’t they have got those two runs?”

Marty moved his fork back and forth across the table. His brows were still knitted. These examinations by Buck were rapid-fire; you had to know your stuff.

“You signed Hub for a slow ball.”

“How do you know?” Buck barked.

“Benson moved over closer to the left field foul line. Hub had been turning on the heat and Powell had fouled twice and each time had hit too soon and had fouled into right. If Hub crossed him with a slow ball, and if he was set to meet speed, he’d hit way out in front. That meant he’d pull the ball far over into left.”

“All right. What happened?”

“Benson didn’t go over far enough. If he had moved fifteen or twenty feet closer to the foul line--”

“Kid,” Buck beamed huskily, “if I do say it myself you’ve sure picked up what I’ve learned you. That’s the set-up to a hair. If Benson had moved over all the way he’d have caught Powell’s foul instead of not getting to it at all. The stands thought it was a swell try, but you and me know it shouldn’t even have been a try if he had placed himself right. If he’d have caught that foul Powell wouldn’t be still standing there with a bat on his shoulder to take another cut and dump that Texas Leaguer and bring in two runs. Kid, the way you’ve told it I couldn’t have told it any better myself. Right to a hair. Seen the newspapers this morning?”

Marty nodded.

“What ones?”

“Only the Herald-Trib.”

“See what the Trib said about Hub?”

“Yes.”

“All right; what about it?”

The waiter set down eggs and bacon. For the moment breakfast was forgotten. Again the fork made slow, thoughtful marks back and forth across the spotless cloth.

“The Herald-Trib was dead wrong, Buck.”

“Why?”

“Hub had his speed. I thought he had as much speed as he ever had

shown.”

“How do you know? By the loud smack when the pill slapped into the mitt?”

Marty laughed confidently. “That’s old stuff, Buck.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. You taught me that one a month ago. Any smart catcher, by taking it right, can make any pitch sound like a rifle-shot. It’s a trick. I’ve learned how to do it myself. No, it wasn’t that. It was--Well, it was the way most of them were swinging.”

“What do you mean, swinging?”

“They were swinging late.”

“They hit him, didn’t they? Plenty. If they were swinging late how come they hit him?”

“All through the game they were set for speed. Naturally, now and then they’d time it right.”

“That isn’t telling me why you know he had his speed. Bear down. Why?”

“All through those five innings when they weren’t meeting it they were hitting into right field or missing. That meant only one thing, that they were hitting late. Didn’t it?”

“Are you asking me?”

“No,” Marty said slowly after a moment of thought; “I’m telling you.”

Buck Olsen’s huge, gnarled paw of a right hand smacked down upon the table. The silver jumped.

“Kid, I’m proud of you. That’s the ab-so-lute low-down. Hub was in there with just about everything, but it was their day to hit. Any pitcher tossed in there against them Sharks yesterday would have been wasted. That’s where your old man pulled a boner.”

“How?”

“As soon as he saw how it was he should have yanked Hub and saved him up, and shot him back at them Friday.”

Marty frowned.

“No criticism, you understand, kid,” Buck hastened to say. “I ain’t here to criticize any old man to his kid. Just talk between you and me.”

“Sure,” Marty said uncertainly.

“You keep your eyes open and watch what we do to them today,” Buck predicted grandly. “Binny’s working today and me and Binny go along swell. Binny’s always had the Indian sign on these birds. He’ll step out there and make them break their backs like he’s done twice before this season.”

That afternoon, from the bench, Marty saw Carl Binny bring the Panthers home to a shutout victory. The score was 3-0. The Sharks got only one man as far as third base, and got only four hits. Buck Olsen had a large and profitable

day. The box-score gave him a home run, a long single, a sacrifice and a walk. The home run had cleared the high wall of the left field bleachers.

Marty, still thrilling to the tingle of the game, rode back to the hotel with the catcher. Buck was in a swaggering, exultant, expansive mood.

“Kid,” the hoarse voice exulted, “when I slap one right she travels properly. Did you ever see anyone hit a nicer sock over that right field wall?”

Marty shook his head.

“I felt hits in my bones. Like as not I could have poled out another solid poke if your old man had let me take a cut at the ball in the fourth instead of laying one down. I had that pitcher measured like I was a tailor with a tape. You noticed how Binny worked his game today?”

“Sure!”

“All right; how?”

“By mixing them.”

“Isn’t it the truth? Mixing them up all the time. Giving them no chance to get set. Crossing them up inning after inning. Kid, that’s the stuff that wins ball games in any man’s league.”

Marty’s hand strayed into a pocket and came in contact with something stiff and oblong. It was the letter that had come from Sparky Woods that morning. So that was what won ball games. Change of pace. Mixing them up skillfully and cannily. Keeping the batter guessing so that he never knew what to expect. The street car stopped outside the hotel and he swung off the front platform at the catcher’s heels.

“Buck, can you spare a few minutes?”

“For what?”

“I have a letter. It’s from one of the fellows and I’d like to talk to you about it.”

“Need any advice?”

“I think so.”

“You know where to come for advice,” Buck said indulgently. “As many minutes as you want. What’s it all about?”

“It’s a letter from Sparky.”

“What Sparky?”

“You know. I’ve told you about him before. He’s our ace pitcher.”

“Sparky? Oh, yes; sure. I get it now. Sparky Woods. What’s this Sparky been doing?”

“He’s up at a camp in Maine.”

“Ritzy kid, eh?”

“Well, he goes to this camp in Maine every year. They have eight different camps around the lake and they have a sort of league. He’s been working all summer on a ball.”

“All summer on one ball?”

“That’s what he says.”

“You want to watch out for that,” Buck said earnestly. “Where would Binny have ended today if he was a one-ball man? A one-ball thrower is like a man with one leg on him. Maybe he’ll get there and maybe he won’t. If he does get there it takes a lot of going. Anything else on your mind?”

“Yes. He says Darcow happened to drive through and dropped off to see him. He threw this ball for Darcow, and Darcow looked it over and told him to keep right on.”

“Who’s Darcow?” Buck demanded. “He’s a new one on me. Never heard of him.”

“He’s our baseball coach.”

“Darcow? How do you spell it?”

Marty spelled the name.

Buck frowned. “I still don’t get him. Tell me, what league did he ever play in?”

“He never played professional ball, Buck. I guess he isn’t thirty years old. He was a letter man at football and baseball while he was at college.”

“College, eh?” Buck laughed good-naturedly. “I get you now. I’ve seen some of these college men come up to the leagues. Mostly they get farmed out for two or three years seasoning. All they know is pink-tea baseball. Give them a man on first with one down and all they know is steal or sacrifice him around.”

“Darcow knows the game,” Marty said loyally.

Buck waved a hand, still good-natured. “All right, kid; we won’t argue. You’ve met this bird Darcow and I haven’t. Maybe you’re right. Don’t forget one thing, though. You’ve stepped around the big time with the Panthers. I’ll bet a nickle right now you know more baseball than this Darcow will ever know in his whole life.”

Marty said: “But how about Sparky Woods, Buck? What about this ball he’s working on?”

Buck Olsen shrugged. “How do I know? I ain’t no mind reader to pop up with answers.”

“But---”

“Listen, kid; anybody’s a sap to call a play they can’t see. We got some umpires in this league who don’t see the plays or they wouldn’t call them like they do, but I’m not built like that. I’ve got to have it where I can give it the looks. I don’t know your lay-out. I don’t know anything about the teams you play. I don’t know anything about this Sparky. I guess the only thing is for you to go back there, and keep your peepers open and use your head.”

Marty wanted concrete information and persisted stubbornly. “But

ordinarily, Buck, a one-ball pitcher----”

“You’ve got the right slant,” Buck told him. “Ordinarily a one-ball pitcher is just a sucker who’s in for a bad day. And if anybody wants to argue about it and take you up on that, you just tell them that Buck Olsen said so.”

“Thanks, Buck,” Marty said. “That’s what I wanted to know. Now I know where I stand.”

It rained on the morrow--a steady, persistent, all-day rain--and the third game with the Sharks was washed out. Marty spent the afternoon writing letters, and one of them was a cautiously warning epistle addressed to Sparky. In the evening he went to see a moving picture. The picture didn’t completely capture his attention. All through its showing a corner of his mind lingered with three assertions Buck Olsen had made that day:

He had traveled with big leaguers.

He knew more real baseball than Darcow would ever know.

When he went back to Arrowhead he was to study conditions as he found them and use his head.

His chest swelled. It ought to be a mighty good head by this time, he told himself, not without a tingling sense of pride. After all, why should he not have the head? Hadn’t the great Buck Olsen trained him? Was there a better catcher in either of the big leagues than Buck? Hadn’t Buck pounded a table and said he was proud of him? He drew a deep, intoxicating breath. It was something for a man to have Buck Olsen proud of him.

Friday his father sent Hub Watson out again, and this time Hub’s dynamite speed had the Sharks blinded. Directly after the game the team jumped for St. Louis. The weather was hot--Binny weather, Buck called it. And in St. Louis, on Saturday, Carl Binny’s shrewd change of pace brought another victory.

Through the last half of that game Marty sat on the bench and turned a problem in his mind.

“Buck,” he said, “I’m puzzled.”

“Yeah? What about, kid?”

“Binny wins by mixing them up and crossing the batters. Hub wins by throwing them past the batters and using an occasional slow ball. What’s the answer?”

“Kid, it all depends.”

“On what?”

“When a thrower like Hub’s got so much speed they don’t see the ball; he’s got plenty.”

Marty nodded. Everything was clear now. Sparky just didn’t have the sort of smoke Hub had. He couldn’t have that much smoke. The boy wished he had expressed himself more freely in his letter to Sparky and had not been so cautious.

And then it was Monday, and he was to take the train that afternoon for Arrowhead.

He ate luncheon that day with his father and Buck Olsen's hoarse, argumentative voice came from another table. At one o'clock he and his father went up to their hotel room. Marty's trunks had gone off that morning by express; his grip, packed save for his leather toilet case, lay open upon a dressing bench.

"What train are you making, Marty?" Silent Bill Gage asked. "The two o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Too bad a night train wouldn't fit into the schedule. Then I could go to the station with you. As it is, I'm afraid you'll have to go alone. I must be at the ball park at two o'clock."

"That's all right, Dad; I understand." Abruptly Marty asked something that had been close to him for days. "How are we going to finish this year? Are we going to go any higher or are we going to stick around?"

The man weighed the question as though the habit of the long, silent years was hard to break. "We'll be lucky if we finish third," he said at last.

"But we've been in second place since the end of May."

"You're forgetting that we're carrying four rookies in the batting order. It's a long grind, from April until October. Men playing for the first time in fast company are apt to tire. As a matter of fact, Marty, we've already passed our peak. Next year, though----" He left the sentence unfinished, but Marty knew what that "next year" meant. Next year his father hoped for a pennant and a place in the World's Series.

Bill Gage spoke again. "Said good-bye to the boys yet, Marty?"

"Yes, sir. This morning after breakfast. Buck will be up for a moment."

Silent Bill gave him one of those inscrutable glances. "Like Buck, don't you?"

"A lot," Marty said frankly.

"Good man, Buck. He can hit them and he knows the weakness of every man in the league. I've seen him hold a pitcher up to a win when the game should have been a defeat. What's he been doing, loading you up?"

"Loading?" Marty was puzzled.

"With heavy advice," the man said dryly.

Marty flushed uncomfortably. "He's told me things."

"I've known Buck for years. So far as I can see that's one of his strong points--telling somebody something. He used to tell it to the umpires until he counted up how much in fines it was costing him. A mighty sweet catcher, but a little too windy with the mouth. Been telling you how much he's taught you?"

“Well----” Marty’s flush grew deeper. “He has given me a lot of good dope.”

“Most of it,” Silent Bill said, “you can forget. Not that Buck doesn’t know his own stuff; but sometimes, in handing out heavy advice, he doesn’t take points into consideration. I thought, once or twice, of pulling you off; sometimes a talker like Buck can put a young fellow on the slide. Then I got to thinking that if you were the kind who couldn’t stay up with wind in your ear, you’d run out of line on the bases later, anyway. Time’s getting short.” He reached for the telephone and called the hotel porter’s desk. “Hello, Jim; how’s the boy? Not sore that we’re slapping your home team around, eh?” The man chuckled. “Marty’s starting back for school. Send up a hop for his grip, will you?”

Now that the actual time of parting had come Marty found his heart heavy. “I’ll see you and Mother at Thanksgiving, won’t I?”

“You can lay a bet on that,” said Silent Bill Gage, “and quote long odds.”

The two o’clock train, pulling out on the minute, carried a boy who forced himself to swallow the lump that choked his throat and who resigned himself philosophically to separation from the father he loved. Buck had missed him at the hotel, but had followed in a taxi and had caught him at the station.

“Kid,” the catcher said, “remember all I learned you. If you keep your head up you ought to be tops.”

“I’ll remember,” Marty promised. He was touched. His father was right, of course; Buck was talky. But what other player on the club, failing to say a final good-bye to him at the hotel, would spend taxi fare to follow him to the station?

A red-capped porter carried Marty’s bag to his Pullman section. He surrendered his hat and saw it disappear into the protection of a paper bag. The porter brought him a pillow for the back of the chair.

“Sam,” Marty demanded, “what’s the story? A flat wheel at all four corners of this rolling boiler factory?”

The porter grinned. “Boss, there ain’t a flat wheel on this whole road. There ain’t for a fact.”

“Stop kidding me,” Marty chided.

“Boss,” the porter insisted earnestly, “every coach on this road’s been special inspected. You’ll sleep good tonight.”

Marty, seasoned traveler because of his journeyings with the Panthers, slept soundly. He had left a call for six-thirty. He liked to shave and dress at that hour for then he had the wash-room to himself. The rush, he knew from experience, didn’t start until about seven o’clock.

The first pang of separation from his father was over. With the mountains and gorges of Pennsylvania flashing past the diner window he ate a leisurely

breakfast and then returned to the sleeper. His section had been made up, the berths had miraculously disappeared and, in their places, were the upholstered, towel-backed seats of day travel. He glanced at his watch. Eight-thirty. By eleven o'clock he ought to be at Arrowhead.

The train stopped at a station and a boy came through with newspapers. Marty bought a Pittsburgh Post and turned eagerly to the sports pages. The Panthers had been nosed out by a ninth-inning rally in the final game at St. Louis. But Buck--the mighty Buck Olsen--had crashed through with three solid hits and had driven in two runs.

Marty whistled softly and thoughtfully. Of course, nobody in the whole world knew more about baseball from the inside than his father. And yet, what if Buck was windy? He knew the game, too, didn't he--that is, the game as a catcher saw it from behind the plate? And if Buck, out of his wide experience taught another catcher, that other catcher should know something, too, shouldn't he?

Marty whistled again, a joyous melody, and stared the length of the car with cheerful eyes.

There were signs of activity, which always meant the train was nearing a stop. The porter came through, brushed him off and carried his grip to the train platform. Ten minutes later they were at Arrowhead. The boy stepped down to the station and picked his grip out of a long line of other grips.

A familiar voice lifted in a shrill cry of welcome. "Hi, there, Marty Gage."

Marty yelled: "Hi, Sparky Woods."

"How's the boy?"

"Swell. How's yourself?"

They fell upon each other with violence. Presently, when the pummeling was over, Marty walked into the station and turned in his trunk checks to the baggage office. Then, with the grip swinging from one hand and Sparky Woods striding along at his side, he started up the long hill toward the school.

"How about after dinner?" Sparky asked. "That too soon for you?"

"How about after dinner what, Sparky?"

"I want to show you something."

Marty's reply to that was an exact imitation of Buck Olsen. "Yeah; what?"

"My fast ball. I wrote you about it. Don't you remember? You wrote me, too. I won seven games with that fast ball in the camp league."

Marty sighed. Sparky was sold on the idea of a one-ball delivery--absolutely sold.

"Darcow was up at the camp for a day. Oh, yes; I wrote you about that." Sparky was elated. "Darcow says it's a honey."

Marty said nothing.

"A honey," Sparky insisted.

Marty said: “Did Darcow see you in a game or were you out there throwing them at him?”

“Throwing them.” The catcher stopped short. “What’s the matter with you, Marty?”

“Nothing.”

“You act---- Oh, well; wait until you see it. Darcow says it’s a honey.”

“Is it?” The catcher swung the grip lightly to the other hand. “I’ll tell you better when I look it over.”

CHAPTER II

Marty Decides

Late that afternoon Sparks Woods, after hours of impatient waiting, got the chance to show his fast ball.

Marty had been in no hurry. First, without haste, he unpacked his trunks, stowed his possessions on hangers in the closet and in bureau drawers, and set his room to rights. He took from his trunk a framed, signed photograph of Buck Olsen. It was a picture of the catcher, his legs spread apart and glove and hand held out to receive a pitch, and Buck had signed it. Marty dusted the frame, breathed upon the glass and polished it, and set the picture on his desk so that it was the first object you saw when you walked in through the door. Then, and not until then, did he stick a mitt under his arm and start down the stairs.

He had thought this was to be a private review and was surprised to find Darcow apparently awaiting them at Arrowhead Field. Oh, well, if Darcow wanted his advice---- He ran one hand into the battered, battle-scarred mitt and stretched his arms.

“Let it come, Sparky.”

Sparky, as fairly blond as Marty was fiery red, warmed up slowly. The ball drifted in without speed and with a lazy, nonchalant droop. Marty nodded. That was the way to warm up--no effort until all the muscles of arm and shoulder were loose. Thinking to display a newly-learned accomplishment, he took one of the soft pitches solidly in the cup of the glove with a snapping, forward twist of the wrist. There was a loud smack that echoed sharply across the field.

Darcow, inspecting the team benches recessed under the stands, spun around. “What are you trying to do, Sparky?” he barked; “throw out a dead, cold arm?”

Marty grinned. “He’s lobbing them, Coach.”

“That didn’t sound like a lob.”

“It’s a trick I learned while with the Panthers this summer. I got it from Buck Olsen.”

Darcow made no comment.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Sparky put on speed. Pitch after pitch stepped up, and the ball began to smoke. Marty, taking the throws with practiced ease, let his eyes wander.

Since June he had been accustomed to big league parks, big league players,

big league crowds and big league stands. Arrowhead Field, deserted, suddenly seemed small and shabby. What was it Buck had said? Pink-tea baseball! Marty chuckled indulgently. Buck would probably call this a pink-tea park. And yet, for all that, the covered wooden stands, the uncovered, unpainted wooden bleachers, stirred something raptly in the boy's eager blood that no carefully-groomed, steel-and-concrete big league park had ever touched.

"Ready, Sparky?" Darcow called.

Sparky waved a gloved hand.

Darcow, with quick steps, came across the grass from the recessed bench and stood behind the pitcher.

Marty's eyes ceased to wander. This was the big moment, the moment that had brought him here. As though he were behind a threatening batter he squatted down on his heels and held mitt and bare hand apart, outstretched. His voice--a pattern of Buck Olsen's voice--became a crooning supplication.

"All right, Sparky, old boy. Show it to him. Stick it under his nose. Let him smell the stitches."

The ball was a streak.

This time it was not necessary to give the mitt that twisting, forward snap from the wrist. White horsehide dynamited into brown leather with an explosive crash.

"Don't knock him down, Sparky," Darcow chuckled; "it's possible we may need him next spring."

"Yah!" Marty jibed; "let me see any pitcher knock me down." He whistled under his breath and waited tensely for the next pitch.

Again the ball smoked and detonated.

"Yip-pee!" Marty tossed the ball into the air. "I can see where the teams we play might as well leave their bats back on the bench."

For five minutes the ball smoked and blazed. After the fashion of fast balls thrown overhand it hooked sharply toward the inside every time it whistled toward the plate. Marty, trying to be calm and nonchalant, after the manner of Buck, spoke to himself under his breath. Darcow was right--a honey. But was that rifling inshoot the only cartridge in Sparky's gun? Had he really developed into a one-ball man? Last year he had had a nice, teasing drop and a deceptive out-curve. What had become of them? Were they to be thrown overboard?

Darcow, with a curt nod, called a halt. Sparky stood on the mound, near the coach, looking toward the catcher. Marty, the mitt under his arm, strolled up the fairway toward them. He could see by the look in Darcow's eyes that the man was very well pleased.

"Well?" Darcow asked.

"Sweet," said Marty.

A flame leaped into Sparky's eyes and they were brighter than Darcow's. Marty took the mitt out from under his arm and pulled absently at the lacing.

"Where did he leave the rest of his stuff, Coach?"

"The out and the drop?"

"Yes."

"They're around." Darcow's voice was unworried. "He'll shake them out of his arm every now and then as a smoke-screen. Not that he'll have to bother much with them."

"No?" Marty, at times, had the faculty of a bland, maddening stare. That was another trick he had acquired from Buck Olsen. Buck used it to get a batter's goat. The catcher stared blandly now. "You know what happens to one-ball pitchers, don't you?"

"Does it happen that you got that information from Buck Olsen?" Darcow asked mildly.

Marty's cheeks grew red. His hero-worship of the Panther's burly catcher was known to the entire school.

"Buck ought to know, Coach."

"Did it ever occur to him to tell you that it might possibly depend upon the one ball?"

Of course Buck had said that. But Buck had been speaking about a big league star like Watson--"Dynamite" Hub Watson. Good grief, did Darcow think that Sparky was a Hub Watson? The temper that went with Marty's red hair flamed in sudden outburst.

"It depends upon something else too, doesn't it, Coach?" he asked with a knife-drawl in his voice.

"On what?"

"Up on the man?"

"We have the man," Darcow said evenly. His hand was laid with an encouraging pressure on the pitcher's shoulder. "And he certainly has the ball."

"Of course," Marty said. The way he said it didn't make it an "of course" at all. "But--" He stopped. There was something about the man that gave him warning. They went toward the gym. In the doorway that led into the dressing-room, the showers and the lockers Darcow contrived to let Sparky get ahead.

"Marty," he said in an undertone, "that was poor judgment. Hereafter, if you want to discuss how good or how bad a man may be, talk to me privately when that man is not around. I want that understood."

The catcher shrugged.

"Understood," the coach said pointedly.

Marty nodded. The heat of one whose expert knowledge had been flouted still simmered in his blood, but even in his temper he had sense enough to see

that nothing was to be gained by insistence. Not now, anyway. After all, why argue now? Spring practice was months away. Perhaps, by the time March rolled around, Darcow would have snapped out of his infatuation for one ball and come to his senses.

“It’s a sweet ball,” Marty agreed.

Darcow looked at him keenly. Darcow was not fooled. Something in the undercurrent of the boy’s voice told him, subtly, that he had not changed his opinion.

Sparky was in uniform; Marty had not bothered to get into baseball togs. He called an abrupt “See you tonight, Sparky,” turned back through the doorway and went off toward the outfield gate. As he passed the raw, pine tiers of the bleachers three prophetic words that Buck had spoken kept running through his mind.

Pink-tea baseball!

Through September and early October he followed the fortunes of the Panthers, getting the scores over the radio each night in a sports broadcast. His father was right--the team has passed its peak. Week by week he saw them falter, and finally drop out of third place. When the season ended they were making a grim, determined fight to keep from falling out of the first division.

Boys thronged his room at these sports broadcast hours. They asked questions.

“What’s the matter with the Panthers, Marty?”

“Why?” Marty asked.

“Even with Buck Olsen they’ve gone sour.”

“What did you expect them to do, win the pennant?”

“Well, they were in second place for a while----”

“Yah!” said Marty, “and four green men playing every day. The pace gets green men their first season. They’re always on an anxious edge. They haven’t learned how to relax between plays and they tire out.”

“Oh!” said the boys. They looked at Marty with respect.

Marty swelled a little. He fed on the respect that came to him as the son of a big league manager.

Thanksgiving morning his mother and his father arrived at Arrowhead and came up to his room. The campus put on a demonstration for the man who had made big league history and would make more before he was through. Even Darcow elbowed through the crowd for a word with Silent Bill and Marty was thrilled to his toes. Later he, his father and his mother motored to the Arrowhead Inn for a turkey dinner. Marty hoped that the pumpkin pie would be good.

“How does baseball look to you up here?” Silent Bill Gage asked at the end of the meal.

The pie had been good. Marty sighed and opened his belt a notch.

“We have a fast-ball pitcher named Sparky Woods,” he told his father.

“Didn’t I meet him this morning?”

Marty chuckled. “Yes. You ought to remember him; he never took his eyes off you.”

“Tall, blond boy, Marty?”

“That’s the fellow. Long arms just made for speed. He may go places next spring.”

“How’s his control?”

“Fine.”

“How does he break them?”

“Fast. The ball comes in high across the shirt and hooks in wickedly toward a right-hand hitter.”

“How far in?”

“Not far enough to hit a man. Not a wild in. When they do hit it they’ll catch it down near the handle--that is, unless they’re keen men and step back to get their shot.”

“You don’t find many keen men playing ball in prep schools,” Silent Bill said dryly. “They’re not old enough; they haven’t had the experience. From what you’ve told me it looks as though your friend Sparky ought to go places.”

“Well----” Marty gave it thought “It depends a whole lot on how he’s handled, Dad.”

The mouth of Silent Bill Gage twitched. “Who’s going to do the handling, Marty?”

“I am,” Marty said grimly.

Silent Bill grinned. “Do a job, son.”

“I intend to.”

Later, while his mother rested in the room they had taken at the Inn, he had a chance for a private talk with his father.

“Buck’s contract with the Panthers ran out this year, didn’t it, Dad?”

“Yes.”

“How did you sign him? Or is he signed?”

“He’s signed.”

“Three years--the same as before?”

“No,” Silent Bill said shortly; “one.”

Marty couldn’t understand that. A star in his prime--and Buck was certainly in his prime--was usually signed for three years--two years, anyway. Of course, toward the end the New York Yanks hadn’t signed Babe Ruth to three year contracts; but, then, everybody knew that the Babe had gone past his prime. Marty understood what was meant by “past his prime.” Legs! You had to cover ground in baseball and cover it fast. Day after day you dug your

spikes in and your legs took a hard pounding. When your legs gave out you were through. And legs were the first part of a baseball player to show that he was slipping.

“One year?” he asked. It was a question, a plea for information. Had Buck’s legs begun to cave?

But his father said nothing more.

A month passed and he was home for the lively Christmas holidays. This was the last time he would be home until June, for at Easter the Panthers would be in the south and, though his mother did not travel with the team any more, she always went to the training camp with his father. But by Easter the Arrowhead squad would probably have started indoor practice and he wouldn’t be able to get home, anyhow. His hands would be full.

The winter ran its course. Late in February the Panthers started for Florida, and the newspapers his father sent him showed pictures of Buck Olsen in action. None of the reporters at the camp wrote that Buck was slowing up. That made the one-year contract still more unexplainable. He clipped the pictures and added them to the growing collection in his room.

March came in with a swirling storm of snow and sleet. Baseball seemed far, far away. And then, suddenly, the weather changed. Under a warm noonday sun the snow melted and disappeared. Presently pussy willows put out their buds and the campus turf oozed softly underfoot. An awakening world cried: “Spring!”

The call for baseball candidates was posted on every bulletin board around the school buildings. Marty got out his spiked shoes, and his three bats and his worn, beloved mitt and went off gayly to the Arrowhead gym.

There was a big turnout of candidates that year--a much larger turnout than usual--probably the after effect of Silent Bill Gage’s Thanksgiving Day visit. For a week Darcow and Captain Jimmy Blake had to pick their way in and around and through the gym. After that the cuts began and then there was more room. Room to get in some decent conditioning practice, anyway. The confusion of the first days departed.

Marty, working with the battery men, decided that this season would see about the same lay-out as last season--Sparky Woods taking most of the tough spots, Joe Tuthill facing the weaker competition and Bud Moran, who was only a sophomore, promising to come along and be a real man in another year. Bud would probably get into some of the hopelessly lost games as a relief pitcher. Marty wasn’t altogether sure of that. But his principal interest lay in Sparky.

He nursed the team’s star pitcher along. When the time came to loosen up and put on speed, he cannily worked out his own plans, called for the fast ball enough not to arouse suspicion and kept signalling for the outcurve and the

drop. These two curves were, he decided, darned good. Give him time and he'd round Sparky out. Not as a one-ball man. Not as a Hub Watson. Rather as a Carl Binny who could go out there any day in the week and mix them up.

Darcow, coming over to the line of battery men each day, watched the workouts in contemplative silence. Marty chuckled. Lord! Darcow didn't even guess what was happening right under his nose. After a week the coach came over one afternoon and stood with the battery men as though he intended to anchor there for the afternoon. Fifteen minutes passed. The coach spoke dryly.

"Anything wrong with Sparky's arm, Marty?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"He hasn't complained of soreness?"

"Not to me."

"Oh! I thought perhaps that was the reason you seemed to be forgetting he had a fast ball."

Marty knew, then, that he hadn't been fooling Darcow for a minute and that the hours of nursing Sparky along were over. Darcow, a fanatic about that fast ball last September, was still a fanatic. The boy squirmed rebelliously. Darcow had been hired by the school because he was supposed to know the game, but how anybody could be so totally, eternally dumb---- He pounded the mitt.

"Not much chance of that, is there, Coach?"

"Of forgetting the fast ball?"

"Yes."

"Not a bit. Shake out your arm, Sparky, and give me a look at it."

The ball, if anything, had more speed, more flame, more hop than it had owned last fall.

"Keep working it," Darcow ordered.

Marty made a resigned gesture. After all, you had to be patient with pink-tea baseball. It didn't know any better. It hadn't traveled about the country and absorbed the game from the bench, and in Pullman cars and hotel lobbies as big league players talked shop. Perhaps in time----

Darcow moved away. Marty pulled off his mitt, halted the pitchers momentarily and walked after the man. They found themselves alone down near the wrestling mats.

"What is Sparky supposed to do?" Marty asked conversationally. "Is he supposed to forget his drop and his outcurve? Do you want me to drop them overboard?"

Darcow's eyes were level. "Is that your idea of baseball? If you don't know better than that----"

"Of course I do." The boy was genial. "But I also know that when a pitcher builds his whole game on one ball----"

“Are you working the pitchers,” Darcow asked with irritating mildness, “or did you follow me down here to practice a speech? I don’t mind speeches, but I prefer them after the practice is over.”

Marty, in a passion of temper, went back to his place. He was filled with a sense of the pity of it. That fast ball, mixed into a fast ball-slow ball-outcurve-drop salad would march right up to the cashier’s window and collect. But used as the lone foundation of a pitcher’s game it could not hope to succeed.

A whistle blew shrilly and the practice ended. The squad moved toward the locker-room showers. Marty found himself blocked at the door by Darcow and by Captain Jimmy Blake.

“I thought I told you,” Darcow said, coldly now, “not to argue about plays or players in public?”

Marty opened his eyes. “Argue? Good grief! I didn’t argue. I only said----”

“Exactly; you only said. You only raised a question. Let me repeat the order. Hereafter, if you have any question to raise about a play or a player, do it in private.”

Jimmy Blake had been told of the afternoon happening and was irritated and sore.

“He doesn’t know the meaning of private, Coach. He always wants an audience. Let me tell it to him my way so he’ll understand it. Less wind, Marty. Is that clear? Do you understand it? Less big-league wind.”

Marty Gage’s face went scarlet. “Why,” he stammered, “you--you pink-tea third-baseman----”

“Enough,” Darcow said in controlled anger, and pushed him in through the doorway.

Thereafter the coach seemed to shadow the battery work. Look up and he’d be with the infielders; look up again and he’d be behind the pitchers. Marty, raging inwardly, found himself caught in limitations that left nothing to his own judgment. And Buck had told him he had a baseball head! What good was it here? Whether he wanted to or not he had to keep Sparky bearing down on the fast ball and working in an occasional out curve, slow ball and drop.

The team went outdoors. Even there the situation remained unchanged. For Darcow kept a sharp eye on the batting practice and a sharper eye on a red-haired catcher’s signals.

Marty groaned. This was suicide.

What burned him up was the sight of Sparky. Sparky walking on air and not knowing that Darcow was leading him to slaughter. A good fellow, Sparky. One of the best. They didn’t come any better. Sparky was too good a man to get a deal like this.

And suddenly, out of these weeks of helpless dissatisfaction, Marty came to a grim-lipped decision. He’d walk the line that Darcow had marked out so

long--but only so long. He'd go with the coach right up to the brink. But not over it. No, sir. He wouldn't go over the brink for all the Darcows who thought they knew baseball.

When they got to the brink---- The boy's eyes grew hard. When they got to the brink he'd do some plain talking. If Darcow insisted on his course of folly he, Marty Gage, would speak up. Not to Darcow and, above all, not to Jimmy Blake. Darcow wouldn't listen. Jimmy would wise-crack about big-league wind. Oh, no; to neither of them would Marty talk. It would only be a waste of time.

But he would talk to Sparky Woods. He'd show Sparky exactly what the future held for him.

And so the days passed, and finally the calendar served notice that the opening game against Hastings was due tomorrow. This, Marty decided, was the brink. He walked into the council of war that sat in Darcow's narrow, cramped little office off the Arrowhead gym.

It was not an office that had been built for councils of war. The four who occupied it now filled it so completely that Marty had to sit with his broad shoulders propped against the door. Outside, the ground-keeper was making ready for tomorrow's game; through the open window came the steady whirr of the machine clipping the infield grass. But if Marty heard the motor at all he heard it sub-consciously. His mind was at grips with the resolve he had made weeks before. Right up to the brink. That's where he had gone. But not over.

The conference wasn't on five minutes before he knew the worst. They were going to do it to Sparky. He did not argue; discretion warned him against that. With his red head thrown back he stared at the ceiling. The paint had begun to peel from one corner. Occasionally he flicked a brooding look at Sparky; occasionally he shot a frowning glance at Jimmy Blake. Twice he directed a bland, irritating stare at the coach. He wanted to laugh, but this business was far too serious for laughter. He was too bitterly concerned with this mad, senseless thing they were doing to Sparky Woods.

Darcow had not missed that bland stare. The man's cheek muscles twitched.

Marty said to himself: "Waiting for me to open my mouth. I'll fool him today." He continued to stare at the ceiling.

Darcow said, slowly and thoughtfully: "I don't think there's anything else we need go into. Sparky, above everything else I want you to start this game full of confidence."

Sparky nodded.

"You can't win without confidence."

Sparky nodded again.

"Do you believe in your heart and soul that your high, fast inshoot is your

best ball?”

“All the time,” said Sparky. “Every time I let that ball go I know it’s going to be good. There’s never any doubt.”

“Now think for a moment. How good a ball do you really think that blazer is?”

Sparky took time out to think. “They couldn’t so much as touch it in the camp league last summer.”

Darcow, Marty realized mirthlessly, was putting on a show. Grandstanding. And for his benefit. Letting him see how Sparky felt about it. Putting Sparky’s feeling up against his big-league knowledge. Well, Sparky might feel differently after some things had been explained to him.

He settled back in his chair. Thus far in the conference he had not said a word. His lips cracked into a grin. Jimmy Blake would start to wonder what had become of big-league wind. The stare that he gave Darcow was blander than usual.

Darcow nodded. “That’s good enough for me, Sparky. It will be too good for Hastings. You’ll throw your fast one tomorrow and Hastings will be mighty sick of that ball before the game is over. Anything else? Anybody got a suggestion?”

The office was silent.

“All right; that winds up our clock. Clear out of here and give an able-bodied man room to draw a deep breath without running the risk of cracking a rib.”

Marty threw open the door. From the direction of the showers in the locker-room came laughter, the paddle of bare, running feet and then a yelp as somebody turned on the cold water. Sparky and Jimmy Blake passed out.

Marty remained. Lightly, very lightly, he closed the door and shut himself into the office. At the last minute he had changed his mind. He’d speak to Darcow once more before going to Sparky. It was only fair to give Darcow a chance.

Darcow grinned wryly. “I expected this. I could read it in your face.”

“I have a very expressive face,” Marty said in sarcasm.

“I’ll say you have. One of those open-book faces. When you don’t approve of a plan you look as though you’ll change it or die. You don’t like tomorrow’s set-up, do you?”

“Not for a minute,” said Marty.

“All right, then; let’s fight it out. I want you to have as much confidence as Sparky. Confound you, Marty, sometimes I wish you had never seen a big league club. What is it? The same objection or something new?”

“The only objection,” Marty said pointedly. “Buck Olsen kept repeating one thing to me. He told me always to make sure my pitcher kept mixing them

up. Not occasionally. Always.”

“Marty,” Darcow said patiently, “did it ever dawn on you that this doesn’t happen to be a big-league team?”

“It’s baseball, isn’t it?”

“A minnow and a shark are both fish.”

“A baseball is always a baseball,” Marty countered. “Whether a batter lets it go by, or bunts or swings, it’s still a baseball he’s trying to sock.” Secretly, he thought the retort was rather neat.

The coach was silent a moment. The ground-keeper was evidently finished with the infield for the whirr of the machine receded into the distance and became faint.

“Marty, I can’t escape the conviction that traveling with your father’s team all summer hasn’t been the best thing that could have happened to you. It’s blurred your perspective.”

“It’s taught me the game.”

“The big league game--yes,” the coach agreed, and abruptly changed the subject. “How does your father figure the chances of the Panthers this year?”

“He isn’t telling it to newspaper men----”

“He never does.”

“No; but it happens that I talked to him about the team’s chances. He won’t be a bit surprised if the Panthers grab a pennant and cut into the World’s Series next fall.”

“Fine! I hope so. And tomorrow we’ll open our own season by cutting into Hastings.”

The boy gave Darcow a long, steady look.

“We may,” he said, “if Hastings doesn’t lay back for that fast ball and kill it.” His voice was tart. He turned, and walked out of the office, and closed the door as lightly as before.

Darcow should have known, by that very quietness, that Marty had turned dangerous.

The catcher was hot with the flame of an old resentment. What if his father did manage a big league team? Was that any reason for the coach to jibe him about it ever so often and for Jimmy Blake to yawp about wind? It wouldn’t, he thought, do Darcow any harm to travel with the Panthers for a summer. The coach might learn something. That is, assuming that he’d be willing to listen and learn.

Sparky, out from under the showers, sang happily. Marty went under the spraying water in a black mood, dried, and dressed quickly. He had to catch Sparky before the pitcher got away. His hands, exploring a pocket, brought forth a clipping from that morning’s newspaper. “BUCK OLSEN STARS AS PANTHERS SHUT OUT CHATTANOOGA.” Some man, Buck. Some

catcher. He folded the clipping and put it carefully away in his pocket. Olsen with his years of hard experience, and Darcow with his soft, pink-tea baseball! He made a mocking bow toward the coach's office.

"Ready, Sparky?"

"In a minute."

They came out into the fading sunlight of the spring day. The wind was out of the west and promised fair skies tomorrow. The pitcher was jubilant.

"This time tomorrow, Marty, the game will be over. Darcow has it all worked out, hasn't he?"

"Has he?" Marty asked.

Sparky was perplexed. "Well, hasn't he?"

"So he thinks."

Sparky's face fell. "What's the matter, Marty? You don't act like this usually. Isn't everything all right?"

Marty cleared his throat. "Sparky, I don't like to tell you. In fact, I made up my mind I wouldn't tell you unless Darcow refused to listen to me. Well, today for the last time----"

"You've been talking to him about *me*?"

"All season."

"About what?"

"That fast ball."

Sparky wet his lips. "The fast ball? Don't you like it? I thought you said---
_"

"I did. It's sweet. It's a honey."

"But----"

"Did you ever hear of anybody making a full meal on honey? Not much. It would make him sick. Well--that's your fast ball."

"But Darcow says----"

"All right; take it from Darcow if you want to. Who am I that you should listen to me? I'm only the fellow who was taught his baseball by Buck Olsen."

The jubilation died completely out of the pitcher's face. "Listen Marty, if you really know anything----"

"If I really know anything," Marty cried indignantly. "Well, I'll say that's hot. Of course I know something; I'd be a lunk if I didn't. Hasn't Buck Olsen taught me? Buck says a pitcher hasn't a chance unless he keeps mixing them up to keep the batters guessing."

Jubilation had fled from Sparky's face and now that face suddenly went white.

"There you go," Marty groaned, "getting all fussed up. I didn't want to tell you. I held off as long as I could. But what could I do? Darcow won't listen to me and I'm darned if I'll let him make a sap out of you. Don't you see, I had to

tell you. There was nobody left. There was nobody else to go to and try to get things straightened out.”

Sparky said wanly: “What about tomorrow’s game?”

“I’ll answer that. Hastings will discover you’re bearing down with a high, fast ball and throwing an occasional something else. She’ll wait for that ball, and time it, and slap it all over the lot.”

“Why didn’t you tell that to Darcow?” Sparky asked in a small--a very small--voice.

“Good grief! Don’t you understand? I’ve tried. I tried again not a half-hour ago.”

The pitcher clung to one last fragile string of hope. “Darcow’s so sure----”

“Are you trying to compare a man like Darcow to a man like Buck Olsen?” Marty demanded witheringly.

Sparky didn’t try to answer that.

Birds sang in the campus oaks and two gray squirrels played near the base of a tree. They pushed their way through a noisy greeting from boys congregated on the steps of Arrowhead Hall. Marty threw open the door of his room.

“Come in and let’s talk it over, Sparky.”

“What’s there left to talk about?” Sparky asked.

He stood on the threshold of the room. The wall held a photograph of last year’s Panthers. The dresser displayed a brand new baseball, protected by a glass cup, that had been autographed by Babe Ruth. But it was the photograph of Buck Olsen, standing on the study table, that dominated all the other trophies.

The baseball and the pictures had long impressed the school. They impressed Sparky Woods.

“You’re sure of this, Marty?”

“Oh, be yourself. Why shouldn’t I be sure of it? Doesn’t it come from Buck?”

“Doesn’t--doesn’t Buck ever make mistakes?”

“Who? Buck? Sit on the bench and watch him for three months. He’s the class of the league.”

“I can see about what’s going to happen to me tomorrow,” the pitcher said in a voice that had gone dead and lifeless.

Marty, struck by the despair in that voice, made instant protest.

“Wake up! I’m not saying Hastings will butcher you. I’m speaking about one ball. We won’t have to use that one ball all through the game. What for? After awhile----”

A sense of emptiness, of silence, made itself felt. He swung around from the study table. No Sparky stood in the doorway. He blinked his eyes

incredulously.

“Sparky!” he called. He went out into the wide, cool hall. “Hey, Sparky! Where are you?”

But Sparky Woods was gone. Vanished! The dormitory corridor was empty along its entire length.

Marty came back to the room. Good grief, couldn't a fellow take some bad news without curling up? He hadn't intended to discourage the pitcher, but merely to tell him facts he ought to know and set him straight. That was the worst of a fellow like Sparky. A darned good egg, but absolutely no emotional balance. Either far up in the clouds or deep, deep down in the dumps. Tomorrow, without question, he'd be down in the dumps.

For an instant Marty was badly worried. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he went on to a new thought.

Tomorrow Sparky would have found out anyway, wouldn't he? What difference did a day make? A night's sleep might straighten Sparky out and give him a clearer point of view. As it was, Sparky now knew where he stood; Darcow was no longer driving him with blinders. That was something.

“I give Darcow until the fifth inning,” Marty decided judicially. “Maybe the fourth. It depends upon how good Hastings is. When he finds Hastings beginning to time that ball and make a target of it, he'll let Sparky and me use our heads and work a game.”

CHAPTER III

Bad Days

Marty--Big-league Marty Gage--proved to be all wrong as a baseball prophet.

When the fifth inning arrived, as far as Sparky Woods was concerned, there was nothing to decide. It had all been decided. Sparky had faded out of the Hastings game, broken and riddled, in the very first inning.

Marty, warming him up in front of the noisy, rollicking stands, found himself taking the ball from a dispirited, doleful figure. Sparky, whose specialty had always been sharpshooter control, was wild, uncertain and erratic. There is a slip of control that misses by a hair, an inch. Sparky's was a wildness that knew no limits. Twice Marty dug the ball out of the dirt. Once he leaped into the air for a weird pitch. Still another delivery missed him altogether.

"You poor jellyfish," Marty groaned under his breath. "Do you have to go completely to pieces because somebody tells you the world isn't made of sugar-coated candy? If you keep on like this you won't have to worry about them hitting you. You won't get the ball close enough to the plate to give them a chance to hit."

Darcow, seventy feet away on the bench, was acutely aware of his star pitcher's startling reversal of form. He sat on the edge of the seat and leaned forward intently.

This wasn't the sizzling Sparky Woods on whom he had pinned his faith. This wasn't the boy to whom he had preached confidence and who, in turn, had vowed confidence to him. The Sparky Woods out there today seemed to be a wreck.

Darcow shaved a minute or two off the warm-up time. Sparky went to the water-bucket to rinse his mouth. The coach suggestively made room for Marty as the catcher came back to the dug-out.

"How bad?" he asked.

Marty shrugged.

"What's become of his control?"

"He must have left it back in the locker-room. Certainly he didn't show any of it out there."

"Think it worth while to stop him?"

Darcow asked the question frankly in an undertone. You didn't have to fish obliquely with Marty; the undertone was safety insurance against the others on

the bench. The boy knew the ins-and-outs of a catcher's job and had a catcher's hair-trigger judgment. Too much out-of-place judgment at times, the coach thought.

Once more Marty shrugged. That was another trick of Buck's, a casual acceptance of what baseball players call "the breaks." When a man with control went wild that was simply one of the bad breaks, to be accepted imperturbably as part of the game.

"How can you tell? I've seen them warm up like ten cents and then pitch like ten dollars."

Darcow slipped again. Failing to note that this was not a direct answer to his direct question, he made the mistake of accepting it at face value. He, too, had seen loose pitching abruptly tighten up under fire. In the last analysis you had something more than a pitcher out there. You had a man--and a good man could invariably be depended on to turn in a good game.

"All right, Marty; we'll let him take a fling at it. This ought to be his day."

Buckling on his chest protector, Marty was undisturbed because of his deception of the coach. He was sure that he had picked the wise course, the only course. Let Sparky take his lacing. It had to come sometime. Let Darcow rub the sleep out of his eyes and be through, once and for all, with this nonsense. A one-ball man was a one-ball man, and a one-ball man was bound to meet grief. It was down in the books. What odds whether the grief came in this game or the next? Calamity was inevitable.

Darcow signalled and he walked over to the bench to listen to a final word of advice.

"Take your time. Don't rush. Delay as much as you can. Give him time to straighten out. Hold him up, Marty, until you're sure he's found himself."

This was another time Marty wanted to laugh. The joke was almost ghastly. How could you be expected to hold up a pitcher who didn't have a darned thing to be held?

Crouched behind the plate he watched Sparky nervously shifting around the mound and continually fussing with his cap and his belt. On edge! It wasn't a bit like Sparky to show these external signs of an inner conflict. The pitcher was evidently far more unstrung than he had thought. Usually Sparky was cool and unconcerned, a deliberate, unflustered machine of smoothly moving parts. Good grief, had they all been wrong about Sparky? Had his famed iron nerve been only a veneer? Was he in reality only a paper shell?

Marty gave attention to the batter--the turn of his body, where he planted his feet, the way he gripped his bat. These were signs that Buck had taught him to read. Sometimes, of course, you made mistakes, but usually---- He motioned for Jimmy Blake to play over closer to the third-base bag.

The captain moved over without enthusiasm. His pose indicated that he

doubted the command and was all ready to dash back to his left. One of Marty's feet scraped the ground. It said to Jimmy Blake, in the sign language of the team: "Didn't I say to move over?" After that the catcher waited deliberately until the captain was where he wanted him to be.

Marty wasn't taking any chances. He had seen the Panthers lose a game to the Sharks because a man had not gone over far enough to his right. He squatted down upon his heels, and hid the mitt in between his knees, and passed Sparky the sign for that high, fast, blazing inshoot.

The pitcher nodded his head, and reset his cap and hesitated, doubtful and uncertain.

Marty repeated the signal with an insistent gesture of a finger of his right hand against the glove.

"Come, on, Sparky, old boy," he called. "Dish it out to them. Hot off the fire. A little pepper in the stew. Show this baby something he's never seen before."

The coaches barked from the coaching boxes. "Climb into it, Tim. It's only Sparky Woods. We all know Sparky. He's bread and milk for the babies."

Marty grunted in derision. When had Sparky ever been duck soup for any team? Beaten? Sure he'd been beaten. Every pitcher gets beaten. But no team had ever ganged up on him and had a holiday.

Sparky gave a jerky nod to the battery signal. That nod was, in itself, almost an acceptance of failure. His arm swung through the arc of the wind-up. The ball came in like a sick bird with a crippled wing.

The batter, taking a toe hold, drove it on a line into left field for two bases.

Hastings had tasted blood. Hastings wanted more. The coaches danced gleefully and shrieked advice and encouragement.

Sparky, going through the mechanics of his position, had run across the diamond to back up a possible throw to third. Marty grunted. Well, Darcow had asked for exactly this, and now he had it. Right in the middle of his lap. Perhaps, next time, he would listen to somebody else, to a little reason.

The ball had come back from the outfield. The first-baseman went out to talk to Sparky and the Hastings runner sat down on the middle bag. Presently the conference on the mound broke up Sparky faced the plate and the Arrowhead first-baseman returned to his own sack. The Hastings runner came to his feet and began to edge away from second base.

Marty, after another shrewd appraisal, decided that the second Hastings batter intended to bunt. Oh, there was a cure for that and the cure was to keep the ball high. He called for another high pitch. A high ball, he had learned from Buck Olsen, was the most difficult delivery to bunt successfully.

Sparky's control, erratic during the warm-up, slipped completely. The pitch came sagging in around the waist. The batter moved his bat forward and

dumped the ball gently into the pitching fairway.

The runner on second was off.

“Sparky!” Jimmy Blake shouted above the riot from the Hastings cheering sections. “Sparky’s ball.”

The pitcher, his nerves jumping, swooped in upon the rolling leather. The clever fingers that had formerly worked together to concoct deceptive cunning were now a disorganized group of digits. He found the ball, scooped it up, dropped it, clawed for it frantically and hopelessly, and ended by not making a throw.

Hastings had a runner on first, another runner around as far as third, and none out.

Marty walked down to the mound. From the stands he appeared to move forward complacently as though there was nothing to get upset about; but behind his hot eyes a fiery brain seethed and simmered. He tried to keep his voice casual and serene.

“Spotting them a few runners on, Sparky? You’re good enough to spot them a couple and pull out.”

Sparky’s throat muscles worked convulsively as though he was trying to swallow and found it hard.

“Nothing to worry about, old boy. Not a thing. One solid hit and a lucky bunt.”

Sparky ran a jersey sleeve across his forehead. The day was cool and yet his forehead was beaded with sweat.

“You can spot Hastings three runs the best day she ever saw,” Marty drawled, “and still hand her a beating. She’s made to order for you. Just keep working.”

Sparky gulped. “That fast ball----”

“Don’t let a little thing like that bother you. It will be only for a little while. Darcow’ll be giving us some new orders before this game has gone very far.”

The pitcher wavered. “The way the batter hit that first fast ball we gave him----”

Marty could remain casual no longer. Sparky’s weakness stung him. “Snap out of it,” he said sharply. “Didn’t I tell you Darcow would be handing out a few new orders? Trust me. If you lose your nerve now you’re gone.”

Boys in the Hastings stand were beginning to stamp their feet in unison and to shout.

“Play ball!”

“What do you want, time out for Sparky to find his nursing bottle?”

“Hey, Ump; they’re delaying the game.”

“Come on, Marty. Be a good egg. Speak out loud. Let’s all hear what you’re telling him.”

With an effort Marty forced his voice to take on a note of warm confidence. "Listen, Sparky. We've gone through some tough spots together. Lots of tough spots. Haven't we?"

Sparky nodded.

"We'll get through this one. Heads up. You and me. We'll show this Hastings mob something."

The pitcher didn't speak.

Back behind the plate Marty was all keen catcher again. If the entire Arrowhead team skidded he would still be found there playing his game. He gave a side-eyed, calculating scrutiny to the runner on third. The boy was edging off, edging off, always a little farther off. No use to pass Sparky a sign; Sparky would probably throw it into the left field stands. No doubt about it that bright lad, intent on dashing for home if the ball were hit, was too far off to get back. A quick, unexpected snap throw from the plate---- He signalled for Jimmy Blake to watch out for a throw and passed the sign to Sparky to throw him a pitch-out.

Sparky nodded. No wind-up now--not with runners on. He pitched, and once more his control slipped.

The ball, instead of going wide of the plate so that a catcher would be in position to snap a throw away at once, cut the outside corner. The batter swung and dumped the ball into center.

Standing guard at the plate as he waited for the throw in from the outfield, Marty smouldered. What right did Darcow have to try to build a good, all-round pitcher into a trick one-ball artist? It wasn't baseball. It wasn't pink-tea baseball. It was so pale that it wasn't even pink. Why hadn't the coach let Sparky alone?

It did not occur to the boy that it might have helped a lot if he had let Sparky Woods alone, too.

Blue-legged Hastings boys clocked around the bases. They looked like a procession. Two runs scored.

The ball was relayed from center and came to Marty on a long bound. The batter who had crashed that mighty hit was held on third. Marty sent a fleeting glance toward the bench. Was Darcow ready to roll out of his trance and come up for air?

But no sign came from the bench. The catcher shrugged and stepped down the fairway to talk to the shattered pitcher.

The stands went into another revel of stamping feet and shouting voices:

"Let's make it a convention and we'll all gather around."

"Speech, Marty; speech."

"Tell him to hide the ball in his pocket, Marty. That's the only way to keep us from hitting it."

Marty spoke and scarcely moved his lips. "Heads up, Sparky. That bit of dynamiting is over. To heck with that high in. It's done all the damage it's going to do today and it's through. Now we'll begin to play ball."

"My control's gone," Sparky said in a strained voice. "I can't send it where I want it to go."

"Your control will come back."

"How about Darcow? Did--did he sign you to switch away from the fast ball?"

"Darcow's still sleeping soundly on his back," Marty spat out in disgust. He walked back behind the batter, and crouched low, and signalled for a drop.

Sparky's response to that signal was something to make a catcher weep. The ball spat into the ground five feet in front of the plate, and bounded on a tangent toward the stands. Marty made a desperate, sideways lunge but failed to head it off.

The boy on third did not have to run home. He walked.

Three runs had come in on four pitched balls.

Marty lashed himself. Why hadn't he stood firm and insisted on Sparky mixing them up generously during the training period? Good grief, the pitcher was so far gone now, so completely off, that he couldn't put over the old drop.

"And Darcow," Marty told himself in bitter, biting scorn, "calls this the game of baseball."

Jimmy Blake stepped away from third toward the mound, not at the eager trot with which an infielder hurries to steady a pitcher but slowly, as one who carries sad news. Well, that meant that the pitcher had been signalled from the bench. Presently Joe Tuthill came striding across the field from the warm-up alley behind the stand. Sparky handed him the ball and walked dejectedly toward the gym. The Hastings stands yelled and rioted.

Marty walked down to confer with Arrowhead's new pitcher. "Nothing to get steam up about, Joe. Throw me what I ask for. We'll have Hastings' whiskers trimmed long before the ninth inning."

"What happened to Sparky?" Joe Tuthill asked in amazement. It was a rare sight to see Sparky Woods massacred so badly that he was out of the game before a batter had been retired.

Marty shrugged. "One of Darcow's shining ideas. He will get them, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that instead of blowing up Sparky after this game he ought to stand in front of a mirror and talk poison to himself. He wrote the ticket. You hold these babies now and in a little while we'll begin to collect some runs of our own."

But Hastings refused to be held. If she could slap the great Sparky Woods

around she could make chowder of any other pitcher Arrowhead sent out. All through the afternoon Hastings bats continued to pound viciously at white horsehide. The end of the game found Arrowhead a completely beaten team. The score was 9-4.

Jimmy Blake groused and gloomed. He was captain and the debacle hit him hard. To lose the first game by a one-sided score was bad enough; but to see the team's ace pitcher go to pieces before a single man was out was even worse. He and Darcow had planned much of the season around Sparky, carefully picking the games that Sparky would be sent in to win. But today, with Sparky turning in the worst game he had ever pitched, there didn't seem to be a scrap of all their plans left.

Marty crossed the field to the gym with the captain and swung his big mitt complacently. The captain kicked at a stone on the grass and muttered under his breath.

"There's no use in taking it that way," Marty advised. "It was one of those things that had to happen."

The captain was aghast. "Had to happen?"

"Why not? You're not blind, are you? Didn't you expect it? I did."

The captain became almost speechless. "You--you expected it?"

"Of course. Who ever heard of sending out a pitcher to risk everything on one ball?"

"Did anybody ever tell you that Darcow knows his business?" the captain demanded angrily.

"Does he?"

"Are you questioning it?"

"Well, I heard it," Marty admitted, "but today the news seems to be only a rumor. He can't say he wasn't advised. I went to the trouble of trying to tell him----"

"Again?" Jimmy groaned.

Color crept into Marty's face.

"Don't you ever do anything but blow off steam?" Jimmy almost shouted. "A regular devastating cyclone from the majors. Who's the infallible authority this time--Buck Olsen? Same old never-wrong Buck; same old always-right Marty. I suppose if Buck died tomorrow they would have to stop playing baseball all over the country because the great authority would be gone. Oh, wake up and get a good look at yourself. Do it for once. Do it for the good of everybody else. Can't you forget for five minutes at a time that your father is the manager of a big league ball team?"

Darcow, overtaking them hurriedly, stopped the quarrel. But Jimmy, sore and bitter, continued to mutter about big-league wind. Marty, unable to make out exactly what the captain said, smiled blandly.

"It was my fault," Darcow said slowly.

"Yes," Marty admitted casually; "I think it was."

Jimmy's temper went to pieces. "Throw him off the field, Coach. Do we have to put up with this sort of stuff forever?"

Only Darcow knew the real answer to that. Two bright spots of color in his cheeks gave testimony to the effort he was making to hold himself under control.

"Sparky's warm-up was poor," he said, ignoring the catcher. "I shouldn't have started him. Even a good pitcher can have a very bad day. The stars don't win all the games they work. Sparky'll be all right the next time he goes out."

"You think so?" Marty asked. "I don't. Not if he's told to bear down with that fast ball."

Jimmy threw up his hands. "It's hopeless. There's too much wild wind for one such small brain."

"Suppose, Marty," Darcow said, dangerously quiet, "you leave this to me. As a matter of fact I'm beginning to be bored with your opinions about that fast ball." He understood what big-league association had done to the boy and tried to make allowances. But sometimes it was hard--very hard--and he foresaw the day when he might have to roll up his sleeves and call a definite, final halt.

Marty dressed in a hard silence. Wind, eh? That's what they handed you when you showed them you had a baseball brain. Tell them something that was too big for them to digest and they set you down for a squall. He looked around the locker-room for Sparky. The pitcher was not to be found and he did not encounter him until that night in the dormitory.

Sparky had recovered a measure of hope and confidence. When he spoke his voice had something of the old ring.

"Listen, Marty," he cried eagerly, "I've been thinking this out. Suppose I work a bit harder on that fast ball. Suppose I get it down so good that---"

Marty waved a silencing hand. "Nix!"

"But suppose I do?"

"All right; let's suppose. What then? You'll still be a man relying on one ball, won't you?"

Sparky thought it over gloomily. A burst of song came up from the campus under the windows.

"You said Darcow would change his mind about sticking to the fast ball," he reminded the catcher.

"Did I? Well, you can cross that out. It's one of my mistakes. I had a talk with Darcow after the game. He thinks you simply had an off day. He's going to keep you traveling along on your speed."

"That makes it look as though there'll be a nice season ahead of me," the

pitcher muttered.

“Oh, I don’t know. I wouldn’t let that worry me.” The old air of judicious determination had come to the catcher. “Under the law of averages you’re bound to bump into dumb teams with dumb coaches. They won’t wake up to what’s going on and you’ll crash through. The main point is not to lose your grip.”

“You’re certainly being a lot of help,” the pitcher said with sudden, spiteful rancor.

“What do you mean, a lot of help?”

“Helping me to hold my grip?”

“I?” Marty blazed with a sense of outrage. “You’d have found it out sooner or later, wouldn’t you? Where is there any sense in feeding you up on hot soup?”

“Where’s the sense of dripping cold ice down my back?” Sparky flashed back at him.

Marty gave a philosophical shrug. Another voice blaming him. That’s what you got when you went out of your way and tried to do a good job and set a fellow straight.

And yet, after the pitcher had departed, he could not shake off a thin, uneasy apprehension. Looking back upon the season, he saw that Sparky had been full of pep up to the day of revelation. After that the pitcher seemed to crumble and to fall apart.

Marty’s mouth was dry. Perhaps, if he had kept his knowledge to himself, Sparky might have eeled through. There’s such a thing as fool’s luck. He stared at the photograph of Buck Olsen.

“Not a chance,” he decided at last. “It was down in the books. He’d have been pulverized.”

The decision routed the apprehensive fear and filled him with a satisfactory sense of righteousness. He began to whistle. Come what would he’d play the game to the last out and do a catcher’s part. He’d stand squarely behind Sparky, come good days or bad days, and hope sincerely for the best.

And then, in the course of the next week, the conviction grew on him that there was to be no best.

Having slipped from the heights of effectiveness, Sparky seemed unable to surmount the mental hazard of expected failure and climb back. The vitally throbbing assets of a pitcher were gone--faith in himself, courage, confidence. At first Sparky made a heroic effort; a grim, silent, tight-lipped battle; a quivering, anxious struggle. The very tenseness of his effort helped to weary him, to sap his strength, to fill him with fresh doubts. As the days passed and he found no sign of improvement discouragement claimed him and held him fast in a paralyzing clutch.

Where once he had pitched confidently for the corners he now found it increasingly difficult to find the wide-open groove across the center of the plate. As confidence oozed from him all his muscles and nerves tightened. Smoothness left his pitching motion and his arm no longer flowed behind the ball in a follow through. He jerked his pitches and his curves lost their fast, sizzling hooks. Even in practice, with nothing vital at stake, he became an easy man to hit. The squad, scenting easy prey, crowded forward in line at the batting-cage and clubbed his offerings to far corners of the field.

“He’s lost on that fast ball,” Marty told Darcow.

It was the first time he had mentioned the fast ball since the Hastings game. He threw it out tentatively, as a sort of feeler. Perhaps the coach would wake up now.

“He seems to have lost pretty nearly everything,” Darcow said after a dark, frowning silence.

Marty shook his head regretfully. There was still time, he thought, to change the situation; but evidently Darcow was still sound asleep at the switch. If Darcow wanted to be pig-headed, there wasn’t a thing he could do about it.

Besides, a worry far from the baseball situation at Arrowhead had begun to creep upon him. The big league season had started and the Panthers had dropped seven of their first nine games. That didn’t look like cutting into a World’s Series. It didn’t look like being able to hold a place in the first division. He wrote an alarmed inquiry to his father.

As he dropped the letter into a campus mail-box he saw Sparky mooning and moping along an oak-shaded walk. The sight was poignant. Could this be the Sparky who had once walked lightly and lithely on his toes and whose eyes had been coals of eager fire? Wrath swept through Marty. And they called the man who was directly responsible for this baseball collapse a coach!

“Sparky,” he invited, “come up to my room. I have two cans of imported sardines, a big box of salted crackers, and a large bottle of home-made catsup my mother sent me. We’ll declare a feast.”

Sparky was in no mood to look upon the framed photograph of the great, authoritative Buck Olsen! Buck’s picture would have spoiled the feast. He shook his head.

“I’m not a bit hungry.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Not tonight. Save them for some other time and I’ll help you clean them up. Listen, Marty. Tell me something straight, will you?”

“If I can.”

“You can, I guess; you’ll know. Does Darcow intend to use me again this season?”

It dawned upon Marty that Sparky was sunk right up to his neck. A little

more and he'd be gone. What a sweet job of pitcher-wrecking Darcow had done.

"Why not?" he asked in assumed surprise. "What put that idea into your head?"

Sparky was too intent upon the subject to be sidetracked. "You know why not. You can't hand me taffy. Has he said anything to you about not using me?"

"No."

"Honest?"

"I'm giving it to you straight, Sparky."

"Has he said anything at all?"

Marty hesitated. It would do no good to lie. Sparky would have brains enough to know that Darcow must have said something.

"He's worried. Of course, you know that yourself. But he hasn't said a word about not using you."

And yet, as Marty went back to his dormitory, he found himself wondering for the first time if Sparky would be used again. The possibility had not dawned upon him before; now it prodded for an answer. If a pitcher couldn't hold the batters in practice was there any chance of his standing up in a game? Well, that depended.

It depended, principally, on whether or not the pitcher could pull himself out of the slough and fight his way back. Nevertheless, fighting back did not depend entirely upon Sparky himself. It depended on some common-sense cooperation from a man named Darcow. It depended upon the coach telling the pitcher that the fast ball had been a mistake and that the order to bear down with it should never have been given. It depended on Darcow telling Sparky Woods to go out there with a clean slate and forget it.

"Fat chance," Marty grunted. "Darcow wouldn't do that in a thousand years."

His mind was filled with the picture of a pitcher moping lifelessly along a campus walk. He thought that Sparky's chance of fighting back wasn't worth a counterfeit dime.

CHAPTER IV

Marty Takes a Hard One

Still another council of war sat in Darcow's small, cramped office off the Arrowhead gym.

This time there were only three persons in the room--Darcow, Jimmy Blake and Marty. With Sparky not there there was a little more space and less of the feeling of being a sardine jammed into a can. Marty did not have to keep his broad shoulders against the door.

And yet the chair on which he sat was hot and uncomfortable. A trickle of sweat ran down one shoulder and he wished they'd hurry and get it over with. It was, he thought, a useless meeting anyway, and he had a sensation that both Darcow and Jimmy were lost in a fog, and groping around, and trying to find a place to land. For the coach was planning to use Sparky Woods again, planning to send him out to see if the heat and fervor of competition would not produce a miracle.

Marty didn't believe in that type of miracle. He knew that the pitcher didn't have a chance.

The day was Wednesday, and on Friday the Arrowhead team was to journey to Longwood. That was the game they were giving Sparky . . . Longwood. Not a tough shot by any means, but Marty told himself that when a pitcher has nothing, even an eighth grade grammar school team can be tough.

Behind Darcow's desk, from wall to wall, was a clear space of eight steps. Jimmy Blake paced those eight steps restlessly, back and forth, back and forth. Darcow, frowning slightly, tapped an ivory paper-cutter against the desk.

The captain sighed. "Can't we do anything else?"

"What?" Darcow asked.

"But this is playing with dynamite."

"Dynamite," Darcow nodded; "and it may blow up right in our laps. And yet----" He made a motion with the paper-cutter.

"I know," Jimmy's steps halted. "We can't get through with either Joe Tuthill or Bud Moran. We should beat Longwood; she hasn't been going any too well this season. Oh, I know all the arguments. After Longwood, what? The schedule gives us a row of hard games. We can't get through that stretch with Tuthill and Moran. The load would be too heavy for them. I suppose we have to gamble with Sparky. And yet, if he goes hay-wire again----"

"Will we be any worse than we are now?" Darcow asked.

There was something to that. But Marty, squirming in his chair, thought

bitterly that all their thought was for the team. Apparently there was no thought of Sparky himself.

“You’re not really nursing any thought that he’s going to win, are you?” the catcher demanded.

Captain Jimmy Blake whirled about angrily. “Are you supposed to be his friend?”

“I am his friend.”

“You act it.”

“I’m too much his friend to want to see him smashed. I saw him smashed once. When you’ve caught games when Sparky was unhittable it does something to you inside to see him out there being murdered. If he were a good half-miler and had developed a bum knee, would you send him to the starting-mark to face the starter’s gun?”

“That’s different.”

“Yes?” Marty gave an irritatingly bland smile. “Is it? Do you mind letting me in on the secret? How?”

The catcher’s insolence hung in the humid air of the small room. Darcow continued to play with the paper-cutter. The man’s face was expressionless. Jimmy Blake resumed his pacing of the cleared space--six paces one way, six paces another. Marty shifted in his chair. He’d give almost anything in the world to see the old Sparky out there doing his stuff, but--but---- Oh, heck! Didn’t they have any baseball judgment at all? Jimmy did, apparently; this once, anyhow. Darcow, though, was a stuffed shirt. Jimmy stopped his pacing and came over to the desk.

“What are we going to do?”

“Work him,” said Darcow.

“What then?”

The coach made another motion with the paper-cutter. “I’ve never set myself up as a fortune teller.”

Marty stood up. “I don’t mind taking a crack at telling fortunes.”

Darcow said: “I’m listening, Marty.”

“Give him his head. He always had a pretty good pitching head. Let me take him out there and everybody else keep hands off. Maybe, that way, he could win.”

The implication of that sentence was too strong to be missed. The paper-cutter lay momentarily motionless and Darcow flushed slightly. Jimmy Blake gave the catcher a withering glare.

“You want to win, don’t you?” Marty asked.

“I thought it was about time for the wind to rise,” the captain said with a nasty laugh.

“Then have some more wind,” Marty cried recklessly. “I’m out there

behind the bat and I see a pitcher as none of you can see him. What are you trying to do, throw another game away?"

The captain shot a quick glance at the coach.

The paper-cutter moved slowly and calmly. Other players had been benched, or dropped from the team, for insubordination far less flagrant than this. But Darcow, inscrutable save for that faint flush, continued to move the paper-cutter back and forth in an unruffled rhythm.

"Marty's right," he said.

The captain's mouth hung open.

"Not in the sense he means, though. He's right in thinking Sparky has very little chance. The odds are all against us. And yet there's a thousand to one chance that Sparky may come through. If he does---- I think you can all see what it means if he does." He put the ivory cutter down on the desk and pushed it aside. "I think it may be best to give him a new catcher."

Marty's head jerked up. "Why?"

"Oh, there's lots of reasons. For one thing, lack of cooperation. A battery must fit together like the fingers in a glove. Think you can work with him?"

"Why not?"

"Successfully?"

"Are you asking me to both pitch and catch the game?"

"No. I'm speaking of---- Let's call it cohesion. When a catcher loses faith--"

"Listen!" said Marty. "When we sit in here and talk things over and pull things apart I speak my mind. That's what you call me in for, isn't it? Or am I supposed to be a yes-man. Windy Marty!" He gave Jimmy Blake the bland stare. "When I strap on my shin-guards and chest-protector I'm a catcher."

"Even with a pitcher who's out there with a fast ball?" Darcow asked quietly.

"How much is he supposed to use this fast ball?"

"All the way."

Marty said evenly: "That's your unfortunate funeral, Coach. You know what I think of a one-ball man. But when I go out behind the plate I'm a catcher even if you tell him to throw up a watermelon."

Darcow nodded over his shoulder at Jimmy Blake. "The battery for Friday," he said in a level voice that matched Marty's, "will be Sparky Woods and Marty Gage."

Directly after dinner, on Friday, the team piled into buses for the two-hour ride to Longwood. The team was restricted to a light luncheon, and Darcow had sat with them at a long table and had seen to it that they lived up to the restriction. The school gave the buses a send-off of cheers and song.

Marty kept at Sparky's side. The pitcher climbed into the bus and Marty

was still with him. Sparky slid into a seat, and the catcher parked himself on the same cushion.

“Not too hot,” he said. “Just cool enough.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Sparky.

“Have you looked up the dope on Longwood’s last three games? No? You should have. They’d make you feel good.”

Sparky made no comment.

“They haven’t scored more than two runs in any one of their last three games.”

Still Sparky said nothing. He seemed to be sunk into some valley of thought that was miles and miles away from the present.

“That’s the one team on the schedule made to order to be beaten,” Marty babbled on. Good grief! You might as well be speaking to a statue in the park. “They simply can’t hit.”

Sparky stared out the window.

“Hey!” Marty poked him playfully in the ribs. “Are you listening to me? I said these fellows we’re going to play today can’t hit. Do you get that?”

“Suppose they wait me out?” Sparky said.

Marty stifled a groan. Sparky’s thoughts *were* miles and miles away. Sparky was thinking about his lost control. Good night! When a pitcher started worrying about control his control got worse. Buck had told him that. Control had to be a part of you, like breathing. After that the catcher sat in a silence as profound as Sparky’s.

Darcow stopped him as the team piled out of the bus. “What were you doing, conducting a funeral?”

“No,” Marty said tartly, “I was trying to talk to a corpse and gave it up when I found the corpse was really dead.”

He had a moment of fright after he had said that. Perhaps Darcow would rub him out and send in another catcher. However, when the time for the warm-up came, he was out in front of the Longwood stands with Sparky and Joe Tuthill, and the second-string catchers were cluttered on the bench. By and by Tuthill stuck a glove in his hip pocket and disappeared and Sparky was out there with him alone.

He became the born catcher--keen, alert, watchful. Sparky’s warm-up was not entirely bad. There were good moments--bad moments. The umpires appeared and Sparky and Marty came to the bench. Marty knew where he was expected to sit. He found a place next to Darcow.

“Any better?” the coach asked.

“Better than he was warming-up for Hastings.”

“Nothing could have been worse than that warm-up,” the coach observed.

Marty shrugged. “He’s better, anyway.” He didn’t have to worry about

Sparky in this game. Darcow had assigned the pitcher after he had been warned. Of course, he had been warned before the Hastings game, too. Yet the situation today was a little different. Darcow had had one taste of what happened to a one-ball pitcher. If Darcow wanted more of it that was up to Darcow. He, Marty Gage, would catch a game.

Arrowhead got a run in her half of the first on a walk, a sacrifice, and a long single.

It wasn't in Marty to take a licking and like it. He had tried to cultivate a sense of aloofness, but now the aloofness fell. One run, and a better warm-up. He took hope. Sparky was human. He must have known his warm-up was better and he could not be insensible to a one-run lead. If they meant anything to him----

Apparently they meant nothing. Darcow's orders were to bear down on the fast ball. Marty gave the signal and waited. The ball came limping in and his heart sank. Good night! The result of this game was already written. If that was a fast ball with whiskers then a snail was a race horse.

But he had told the coach he'd catch a game. Pleading, urging, cajoling he labored to bring the pitcher along. He used every trick and artifice that Buck Olsen had taught him.

Sparky tottered through the first inning and reeled drunkenly through the second. Only fast, sure fielding, only clean, deadly throws, had kept Longwood from the plate.

"How long?" Darcow asked quietly.

"He's on skates," said Marty. A man on skates was a man perilously close to complete and final disaster. One slip and he was down.

Sparky went down in the third. Some pitchers go down gallantly, fighting to the last. They leave behind them the feeling that with a little luck, with a little of the breaks, they would have pulled through. Sparky went down mutely, and his downfall was a collapse. A base on balls started the slaughter. With a man on and none down he lost what he had of control and what he had of speed and curves. Four hits ripped through the outfield in a row and three runners pounded their spikes around the base paths and crossed the plate. Marty stared hard at the ground unable to bear the sight of poor, battered Sparky walking slowly from the field for the second time.

Arrowhead pulled the game out of the fire in the last two innings. The final score was 7-6.

Tomorrow the newspapers would record the game as an Arrowhead triumph. Marty winced. Where was the triumph? Where could there be a triumph in the sight of a Sparky Woods, crumbling and futile, and pathetic in his futility?

"I quoted the wrong odds," Darcow said as he, and Marty and Jimmy

Blake crossed Longfield Field toward the dressing rooms. "It wasn't a 500-to-1 shot."

Marty banged an angry mitt against his thigh. "You shouldn't be surprised at that. I told you----"

"Here comes the wind," said the captain.

Marty froze into silence. He flung himself into his clothes, left the dressing-room alone, and found a seat on one of the return buses far from Sparky. Talking wouldn't do any good now.

A singing school met the buses and escorted them the last quarter-mile. A bonfire burned on the campus and there was a roar of acclaim as the team was led to the center of the crowd. Marty, in the shadows, slipped away unnoticed. The songs, the cheers, seemed like gayety at a funeral.

A cheer leader called for nine rahs for Darcow. The catcher's mouth twisted into a sardonic grin.

"Pitcher wrecker," he muttered.

He climbed the stairs and walked into his room. There, on the study table, lay a letter from his father:

Don't worry about the Panthers. We're a ball club and we'll hit our stride. There's a problem here that I must take by the neck. When that's attended to we'll hit our stride.

How about that team of yours? You told me one of your pitchers, a lad named Sparky, was going to clean up this spring. I've tried to follow your games through the newspapers. I think he's worked only once and, instead of doing a job of cleaning he went to the cleaners himself.

You said he had speed and control. What's become of them? Speed ought to give him a nice, fast inshoot. A fast in coming in below the shoulders should make him a winner. It's the toughest ball in the world for a young player to hit.

I suppose you know that, but I'm telling you on the chance you've forgotten.

Marty fumbled the letter, dropped it, picked it up and dropped it again. He retrieved it once more and read it in a sort of dazed horror. The horror grew on him and he gulped. The palms of his hands were clammy with an oozing perspiration. If--if that fast, high, inshoot of Sparky's was a winning ball----

Why, of course it was a winning ball. It was the one ball to throw. Didn't his father say so? Buck Olsen knew things, but his father knew much more than Buck. Buck, as great a catcher as he was, wasn't in the same class with his father.

He read the letter a third time. His breath came and went painfully, and he

sat with the paper in his hands staring across the room with unseeing eyes. Then Darcow had been right from the very beginning--and he had been wrong.

The thought sent a stab of ice through his spine. He was cold and began to shiver. His was the ardent nature that did nothing by halves. When he was right he was all right, and when he was wrong he was all wrong. The whole picture of Sparky's failure spread itself before his eyes. Recklessly intolerant of Darcow's judgment, he was as brutally harsh in condemnation of himself. Sparky had been full of pep and confidence until a pig-headed fool had ruined him. He, Marty Gage, was the real pitcher wrecker. Sparky's own catcher.

If the pitcher's courage was shot to pieces, who had fired the first shot? If Sparky was a pathetic failure, who was to blame? Who had first shaken Sparky's confidence with the story that the pitcher was to be thrown to the wolves? Who had robbed him of his nerve, and his poise, and his power? Who had been a big-mouthed, blabbering nut? Who but Marty Gage--Windy Marty--son of the wise man who was known from coast to coast as Silent Bill Gage?

The boy ran agitated fingers through his unruly, red hair. Abruptly he jumped to his feet and walked to the window. The buses had gone; the singing had stopped. A crowd still stood about the dwindling fire; the flames still touched the oaks with a ruddy glow and were reflected in the windows of buildings framing the campus. Yet the fire and the crowd might as well not have been there. He did not see them. What he did see, with stark clearness, was Sparky out on the mound this afternoon--a futile, feeble, faltering shadow of the Sparky who once had been good.

A pitcher ruined by--wind.

Well, he had dumped Sparky into this; it was up to him to get Sparky out. For a time he stood there lost in black thought. Suddenly he turned away from the window, pushed past three boys talking in the dormitory hall and went up the stairs to Sparky's room. He did not bother to knock. As the door burst open Sparky, startled, sprang to his feet.

"What's the matter with you, Marty?" the pitcher demanded in agitated alarm.

Marty closed the door.

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"No."

"You must be sick. You were all right when the bus pulled in. What's happened? You're white as a sheet."

Marty swallowed. "No wonder I'm white. Listen!" His voice trembled. "If I hadn't been such a blind bat I wouldn't have made such a mess of things."

"What things?"

"Everything. I thought I knew all about it and----"

Sparky said: "Come down to earth. You're talking riddles. What is wrong?"

Are you in a jam with Darcow?"

Marty shook his head.

"What is it then?"

"Your pitching. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Everything I said about your pitching was wrong. Darcow was right. Darcow was always right. You should have gone in with that fast ball and knocked them off one by one. You can do it yet."

The pitcher asked a quick, eager question. "Who told you that? Buck Olsen?"

"Nobody told me. I had a letter----"

"From Buck Olsen?"

"No."

"Oh!" Sparky said slowly. Just that one, expressive word.

"My father says so, Sparky. I received a letter from him tonight. It was on my study-table when we got back from Longwood. Here; read it."

Sparky read the typed page and put it down. He still held the letter in his hand, but did not read it a second time. Presently he took his hand away and sighed.

"What's the matter?" Marty demanded, anxiously.

"Nothing."

"Don't you get what that letter means?"

"I know; but----"

"You mean, Buck?"

"Yes."

Marty flamed with a fiery loyalty. "You don't know my father. Just because that letter doesn't happen to come from Buck Olsen----"

"Buck's a catcher," Sparky said. "I'm a pitcher. A catcher would know more about it."

"Look here, Sparky----"

"It's no use arguing, Marty. You can't get away from it--it's a catcher's business to know about pitchers. That's the job he's paid for."

All of Marty's bright dream was gone.

"But my father's a manager," he insisted desperately.

"He picked Buck because Buck was the best catcher in the league. I heard you say that yourself."

"Of course I said it. Buck is the best catcher. But my father's a manager. Buck's never been a manager. My father was playing ball when Buck was a baby; he's been managing big league clubs for twelve years. He knows more baseball in a day than Buck knows in a week; he must know it if he wants to be a manager. You can go out there with that fast ball and mow them down. Read the letter again. It's there in black and white. I'm not giving you taffy;

I'm giving it to you straight."

A bell tolled in the belfry of the tower chapel. Sparky did not pick the letter up, did not so much as give it a glance. Marty saw that his hands were clenched.

"You said you were giving it to me straight."

"I'm not asking you to take this from me. If it were only my word you might say to yourself, 'He was wrong before and maybe he's wrong now.' But good grief, Sparky, if my father says that ball is hot then it's hot."

Suspicion brooded darkly in Sparky's eyes. "What did you do? Did you send your father word and ask him to write you that letter?"

"No."

"Why didn't you get a letter from Buck?"

"I didn't ask anybody for a letter," was all the answer that came into Marty Gage's head.

When he came away that fine, clammy dew of perspiration again bathed his hands. He felt weak. And that cold, creeping icicle was back once more in his spine.

He had wrecked Sparky with his confident babble and plunged him into a pit. Now he couldn't dig him out. Sparky's collapse had become chronic. The disease had gone too far. Only one person in all the world could play the part of rescuer. Marty saw that so clearly, so piercingly clearly, that it hurt.

By quoting Buck he had washed the courage out of Sparky's heart. Only Buck could put that courage back. And Buck Olsen was on the road with the Panthers, and the Panthers were four hundred long miles away.

His watch said eight o'clock. The dining-hall, kept open for the returning team, was closed and dark. He had had no supper, and wanted none. He had expected to see his father's letter revive Sparky as rain revives a wilting plant. Instead---- He swallowed the hard lump that formed in his throat.

Back in his room he paced the floor restlessly. Perhaps, if he went back and tried again---- He clutched desperately at the hope. Sometimes more than one blow is needed to make a dent. Perhaps, if he went back, the truth in his father's letter might sink in and the miracle of salvation might be wrought.

There was some trouble, apparently, at the school power-house. The circuit of hall lamps dimmed as he went toward the stairs. The figure of a man was ahead of him. He followed in the wake of that figure and saw it pause outside Sparky's door and knock. Evidently the room lights were not affected for, as the door opened, the man stood revealed in the stream of light that came from through the open doorway.

Darcow!

Slowly Marty retraced his steps. There would be no chance to see Sparky again tonight for Darcow might stay for hours. He would have given much to

know what was happening in the room overhead.

His rest that night was broken. Once he awoke and lay for an hour, sleepless and wide-awake, with that same lump of ice freezing the same spot in his spine. It wasn't only Sparky; it was the team, too. When Sparky lost, Arrowhead lost. They were knit together, and whatever evil befell the pitcher befell them all. They were one. Windy Marty Gage!

He came down to breakfast late. He felt used up, listless. No pep!

"Where were you last night?" Joe Tuthill asked.

"Last night?" Marty tried to make his voice sound surprised.

"I didn't see you at supper."

"I was here."

Joe looked blank. "Here with the crowd?"

"No. I had some studying to do. I skinned in here as soon as the bus hit the campus, grabbed a bite, and made tracks for my room. Studied until about ten."

"You must have been mighty quick about it." Joe seemed touched with suspicion.

"I was," said Marty; "figured if I got tied up with the crowd I might not do any studying at all." Darn Tuthill; did he have to be a cross-examining lawyer? He finished eating and walked toward the doors, and Jimmy Blake jumped up and followed him.

"Marty," the captain said, "what has happened to Sparky? Do you know?"

"I told you. That fast ball----"

"Oh, cork it. I'm not asking you about that. That's what happened to his delivery--it got plastered. I'm thinking of him. The inside Sparky. What has happened to him?"

"I think," Marty said after a silence, "he's lost all confidence in himself."

"How can we give it back to him?"

The catcher sighed. "I wish I knew, Jimmy."

He bought a morning paper at a news stand off the campus. The Panthers had won and Buck Olsen had helped himself to three singles. Today, Saturday, there were no classes. His mind played with the thought of stopping at the school office, asking for out-of-town permission, and running over to Linwood to see the Saturday afternoon semi-pro game. In the end he discarded the idea. While the game might take his mind, for a few hours, off the cloud that hovered over Sparky's future and save him from the raking fire of his own self-reproach, in the end he would have to come back to both. Running away from his troubles was not worth while.

If there was only some way he could draw Buck's influence into this muddle---- A letter carrier passed him carrying a slim packet of special deliveries to the school office. The boy stood rooted. Why, there was a way--

the obvious way. He could write to Buck at once and mail the letter special delivery. By Monday morning it would be in Buck's hands. And if Buck answered at once, as he probably would, an answer might be here at Arrowhead by Tuesday night at the latest.

He went up the dormitory stairways two at a time and burst into his room. He was in a warm, hopeful glow. If the thought had come to him last evening, the letter could have been in a mail box last night. Oh, this was bound to bring action. He wouldn't give Sparky a chance to think it a frame-up. He'd write the letter, and take it upstairs so that Sparky could read exactly what he wrote. Then they'd put the letter in an envelope, and take it out together and drop it at the post-office.

He wrote at white-hot heat and told Buck the story fully and simply. At any other moment he might have winced at the thought that Buck would think him a bone-head; now he thought only of Sparky. Reading the letter over, he felt his heart leap with a great hope. So Sparky wanted it from Buck, did he. Well, Sparky would get it.

Whistling, he took the letter upstairs. Sparky's door was open but Sparky was not in the room.

Marty snapped his fingers with annoyance. He wanted Buck to have that letter by Monday morning, and the chances were he wouldn't see the pitcher until dinner time. You could usually count on an Arrowhead man to show up for all meals. If--if they sent the letter air mail---- He threw up his head with a gesture of triumph. That was it, air mail. Air mail, special delivery. The letter would surely be in Buck Olsen's hands by breakfast-time Monday.

The dormitory had settled to a Saturday morning quiet. Faintly, from one of the upstairs halls, came the sound of a vacuum cleaner. In his room Marty searched for ways of killing time until noon. He twisted the dial of his radio and searched hopefully for entertainment. A breezy voice, giving a news broadcast, filled the room:

Here's a piece of news that will surprise the baseball fans of the country.

Buck Olsen, for the past five years an out-standing star of the game, was today given his unconditional release by the Panthers. The fact that Buck was released indicates that every other major league club waived on him, else he would have been traded or sold. This means that the great Buck Olsen passes out of big-league baseball.

Buck was having one of his best years. Up to last Saturday his unofficial batting average was .362. Anytime the other clubs let a man hitting far above .300 get away from them, especially a star

catcher, there's a reason.

While Silent Bill Gage, the manager of the Panthers, made no announcement concerning Buck--this was to be expected from Silent Bill--there are rumors that the catcher was a bad boy, which would account for the fact that there was no scramble among the other clubs to grab him. With the passing of Buck the major leagues lose a colorful, brainy, energetic player who was never exactly easy to handle. Which may be another reason he has passed out.

The voice went on to a new announcement, but Marty Gage heard no more. He was dazed, stunned. Buck Olsen? Buck Olsen dropped? It was impossible.

Why, Buck was a star and stars aren't thrown into the garbage can. For a moment he had an idea that his ears must have tricked him, and he had a wholly wild notion of telephoning the broadcasting studio for confirmation. Slowly, painfully, common-sense asserted itself. He had heard the words plainly. Buck Olsen of the Panthers. And if that were not enough he had heard the name of Silent Bill Gage. There could be no mistake.

The letter he had written so hopefully was still in his hands. He looked at it stupidly, laughed a harsh laugh and tossed the sheets toward the study table. They missed the ledge of scarred oak and fluttered to the floor. He did not bother to go across the room and pick them up.

Whatever hope he had of getting in touch with Buck for Sparky's sake was gone forever.

The knowledge gave him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew Buck. Buck, with his touchy, swaggering pride, would not have remained an hour with the Panthers after they had released him. To send off the letter in the mail was useless. Buck, at this moment, might be on his way to any one of four or five hundred towns and cities of the United States.

The boy spoke a strangled sentence under his breath:

"Jimmy Blake is right. Windy Marty!"

CHAPTER V

Marty Faces the Gun

Marty Gage put in a bad week end.

It seemed to him that, sometime between Saturday noon and Sunday night, every boy in the school came to his room--every boy except Sparky Woods. He wondered miserably whether Jimmy Blake got a secret joy out of the fall of his idol. Jimmy dropped in for a moment, said, "Too bad, Marty, about Buck," and was gone. But every other boy who crowded into the room came with questions on his lips:

"What happened to Buck, Marty?"

"Sudden, wasn't it?"

"If Buck is as great a catcher as the papers say he is, why did your father let him out?"

"Boy! When they tie a can to a man hitting .362 it means something. What's the inside story, Marty?"

"Did you know it was going to happen?"

"What do the sports writers mean when they say Buck was a bad boy? Does that mean he broke training rules or went around getting into fights?"

"I don't know anything about it," Marty said patiently. He said it over and over again until he felt like a parrot.

"You mean that this came as a complete surprise to you?" a voice demanded incredulously.

"That's what I mean."

"Bologna! After you traveling with the team all of the past two summers? You must have known that something was going on."

"Why should I?"

"Well, your father----"

"Does your father tell you all about his business?" Marty shot back, exasperated. That dampened the questioning. And because he knew they would be watching to take note of his reactions, and because he felt that he could not waver from an old loyalty, he kept Buck's photograph boldly upon his desk.

Twice, during those two days, he saw Sparky from a distance. He had an impression the discouraged pitcher avoided him, and that did not make him feel any better.

And then, in Monday morning's mail, there was a terse, taciturn letter from his father:

I intended to let you know about Buck, but one of the other clubs leaked ahead of time and the story broke suddenly.

I was forced either to let Buck go or to fold my hands and see this club ruined. After the other clubs learned why we were letting him out they were all afraid to take a chance on him. Perhaps, after he's chewed the whole mess over in the minors for a couple of years, he'll come back with some major league club and won't think he's God's gift to the game.

Buck's a great catcher--one of the greatest I've ever seen. But he got the idea that he knew more about running the club than I did. He went behind my back to the other players and ridiculed my orders. The morale of the Panthers went to pieces and internal dissension broke out. That's why we haven't been able to hit our stride and win consistently. A ball club can have only one boss, and a trouble-maker is too expensive a luxury to have around regardless of how good he may be. If he's a good man that's apt to give him all the more chance for trouble-making if he's inclined that way.

I don't suppose it's necessary to suggest to you that all this is confidential? I see by the Sunday papers that your friend, Sparky, took another spanking. What's gone wrong at Arrowhead?

What had gone wrong at Arrowhead? Marty wet his lips. The same thing that had gone wrong with the Panthers had gone wrong with the team at Arrowhead.

He reread a sentence from his father's letter: "Went behind my back to the other players and ridiculed my orders." Both Darcow's team and his father's club had drunk poison from the same cup. Both had had a trouble-maker.

That afternoon, in practice, a catcher who had been a dynamo of energy and action, was colorless, drab and dull. The voice that had been an electric current to the infield no longer rang with charged emotion. On Tuesday the red-haired fire was even more wetly banked.

"What's wrong with Marty?" Jimmy Blake demanded of Darcow. "What's become of his starch?"

The coach didn't know. He had had weeks to study a collapsed pitcher and still did not know what had caused the collapse. Why expect him to solve a Marty Gage riddle at a moment's notice?

"Think he's gone stale?"

"It isn't that," Darcow said with conviction. "A man doesn't go stale overnight. He breaks piece by piece. You see small signs before the real staleness arrives."

"Well, what *is* the matter with him? It's something. He isn't even full of

wind.”

“You ought to be glad of that, anyway,” Darcow said with a dry humor.

Experience warned him that here was something that needed looking into. If star pitcher and star catcher both lost their effectiveness there wouldn't be enough of the Arrowhead team left to play marbles. When the work was over he made it a point to help the boy gather up catching equipment from in front of the bench.

“Tired, Marty?”

“No, sir.”

“You've been plugging along pretty steadily. How about a few days of rest?”

“I tell you I'm not tired. I don't need a rest.”

Darcow picked up a pair of shin-guards. “Worried about Sparky?”

Marty gave a guilty start. “Why----”

The coach read the hesitation as an admission. If he felt any dismay it did not show in his face.

“You ought to know better than that. Worrying won't do Sparky any good and it will only harm you. Stay on your toes and play your game. Sparky'll come back.”

Would he? With Buck Olsen washed out of the picture as a source of hope? The boy felt miserable.

On Wednesday Joe Tuthill pitched against Glenrock and lost the game, 5-3. At that it was a game that should have been won. Infield errors accounted for most of Glenrock's runs.

Marty, brooding on the bench for one-half of each inning, nevertheless whipped himself to effort when Glenrock was at bat. He saw for the first time how Sparky's collapse had begun to affect the whole team. Even Jimmy Blake. The ragged fielding of the inner defense was bad enough, but Jimmy's two raw errors were appalling. The locker-room, after the game, was first cousin to a morgue. Ghastly!

Jimmy Blake sat down upon a bench, jumped up after a moment and, still in uniform, clumped towards Darcow's office in his spiked shoes. The spikes bit into the flooring. The captain closed the door. Tuthill hung up his uniform and departed without a word. Almost immediately his head was thrust back through the door leading up to the street.

“O Marty! Where are you? Speak up. Has Marty gone? Hey! Marty Gage.”

Marty came out from under a shower.

“Somebody's waiting out here in the street to see you.”

“Coming,” Marty answered. He dressed deliberately and without haste. If the waiter were a sports writer come to ask him about Buck the man was wasting his time. The letter from his father had warned him--confidential. He

combed his hair, slipped into his coat, reset his tie and crossed the room to the street door. As he shut the door behind him the sun slanted directly into his eyes and blinded him. He could not see.

But he heard the greeting of a hoarse, husky voice:

“Hello, kid. You’ve lost some weight. Thought I’d look you up while I was loafing in this neck of the woods. What’s the good word? How goes it?”

“Buck!” Marty cried.

“Sure; who else?”

Suddenly the boy was trembling. “Buck, you’re the one man in the world I wanted to see.”

“Yeah? That’s swell.”

“I wrote you a letter last Saturday to go air mail, but when I heard----” He broke off short.

“That’s all right, kid. What’s the works?”

“I’m in a jam and----”

“If you’re jammed up,” the big league catcher broke in, “a public street ain’t no place to do the broadcasting. My car’s parked up ahead. Let’s stroll up there where we can sit comfortable and talk private. I’ve never had no use for the boys who shout it out in public.”

Marty kept trying to fathom this unbelievable stroke of luck. As they walked toward the yellow roadster Buck Olsen broke into a chuckle.

“Surprised to see me, kid?”

“Buck, you’re an answer to prayer.”

“I didn’t know myself, two days ago, that I’d be here. Things happened sort of sudden. They caught me with a telegram Saturday; I’m signed to catch for that semi-pro. team at Linwood Saturday afternoon. Three hundred bucks for one game. Not bad. If I draw them in at the gate I may play Saturday ball here all summer and maybe there’ll be a Wednesday game hanging around someplace. They brought me on early so they could parade me around and give the customers an eyeful. When I found how close I was to this Arrowhead school, I said to myself, ‘Buck, you’d best run over and see your old pal.’ Buck Olsen never forgets a buddy. So you’re in a jam?”

“Deep. I couldn’t be in any deeper.”

“Think I can help you?”

“You’re the only man who can.”

They were at the car. “Yeah? Bad as that?” Buck chuckled again, took a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. “I’ve pulled more’n one guy out of a jam in my day and maybe I can do it again. Don’t trip over that suit-case. All set? Open your mouth, kid; spill it and we’ll see what it looks like.”

Marty told of Darcow’s orders to Sparky, and of the countermanding

advice he had given the pitcher, and of Sparky's complete collapse. Buck listened attentively and shook a disapproving head.

"I'm surprised, kid. If anybody had told me I wouldn't have believed them. I thought I learned you something."

"I know, Buck; but----"

"Nix! There ain't no buts. You pulled a boner, kid. You certainly ran out of line."

"I know that now, but----"

"But what?"

"But I thought----"

"That's just the one thing you didn't do, kid. If you had done any skull-work you'd wouldn't be so deep in this jam you'd have to shout for somebody to dig you out. We had a talk, you and me, the time you got that letter from this same Sparky. Remember?"

Marty nodded.

"You asked me what you ought to do. I told you I couldn't call a decision unless I had my lamps on the play and knew the lay-out. Right?"

Another nod.

"I told you you'd have to come up here and use your head. Now, ain't that what I told you?"

A third nod.

"Why didn't you use it, kid?"

"But you always taught me, Buck, that a pitcher couldn't stand up out there unless he mixed them up to the batter."

"Yeah? We were talking big league stuff, weren't we? A big-league pitcher throwing them up to big-league batters. That's always the dope in the leagues unless you're a Hub Watson who throws them in so fast you don't need a thing but your smoke. Up here in this league of yours what is it? Big leaguers? Nix! You're playing boys who have just learned to wash proper behind the ears. Kid, I thought you had a baseball brain."

Marty sighed. He, had thought so, too. In fact, he had been so sure of himself that he had not hesitated to tell the world.

Apparently there were a lot of factors he had not taken into account. Disloyalty, for one; treachery to Darcow for another. His mouth was raw with the sour taste of incompetence and he stared fixedly through the windshield at the hood of the car.

"Why don't you go to bat with this guy, Sparky Woods?" Buck Olsen asked.

"That won't do any good."

"Tell him you got your signals crossed and slid into the wrong base. Then you've got this whole jam straightened out."

“I tried that.”

“No good?”

“No. You see----” Marty’s voice was thick. “I had told him, at the start of the season, that all this dope about one-ball pitchers came from you.”

“Yeah? Handing out my name pretty freely, weren’t you, kid?”

“But I thought---- Oh, what’s the use of going into that again? When I woke up and tried to straighten him out he couldn’t see it.”

“Why not? Is he one of these pitchers with an air-space between the eyes?”

“It wasn’t that. It was because I first told him you had said----”

“I get you,” said Buck, and now there was a husky self-satisfaction in the hoarse voice. “You mixed him a dose of medicine with me for the doctor and the dose made him sick. Then you got scared and went looking for me and I was gone from your old man’s club. It’s not the first time I’ve been called in when the patient was pretty sick. Being that a prescription from me put him on his back, I’m the only doctor he’ll take orders from to put him on his feet. Right?”

“Right,” said Marty.

“Where is this Sparky? Can you put your hands right on him if you want him?”

“He was in the locker-room when I left.”

“Think he’s down there now, or will we have to go out and do a search for him?”

It dawned on Marty what lay in Buck Olsen’s mind. His body went hot and cold by turns.

“Buck, you mean--you mean you’ll----”

“Sure; what else do I mean? You want me to make a play and bring in the run, don’t you? O.K., kid; you’ve passed me the distress sign and I’ll go through with it. No buddy ever yelled to Buck and had Buck play deaf. That ain’t my style. I’ll have him throw me a few and then I’ll give him an earful. Hustle him along. If he carries weight I’ll tell him and if he’s not there I’ll tell him that, too. Fair, both ways. Don’t forget to bring along a mitt and a bat.”

Marty was almost incoherent with joy. “Will you wait here?”

“Right here on the spot.”

“Buck, if you knew what this means to me----”

“Kid,” said the big leaguer, “Buck Olsen don’t make a business of throwing down a buddy. Not now or never. Me and your old man pulled off some sour notes, but that ain’t no hair off your head. You and me always got along fine. Trot out this guy, Sparky. Make it fast. I got a date at Linwood that won’t keep and I’ve got to get back there by seven o’clock.”

Marty leaped out of the car and ran for the locker-room door. The door stuck, and he yanked it open with a vicious pull. Oh, he had something to tell

Sparky that would make the pitcher stick up his ears. He had something grand.

And then, abruptly, a new thought jerked at his nerves. Suppose the great tidings that he carried failed to straighten Sparky out? Suppose Sparky had gone down so deep under the tidal wave of discouragement that there was no pulling him back to the shore?

He called from the stairs: "Hi, Sparky."

Sparky looked up from the bench where he sat lacing his shoes. Marty catapulted down the stairs to the concrete floor of the locker-room and grabbed him by the arm.

"Hurry!" he whispered hoarsely.

Sparky shook off the arm.

Marty didn't notice that. He sprang toward his locker and took out a bat and a mitt and was back at Sparky's side. His breath came hard as though he were winded. The pitcher had not moved.

"Will you hurry?"

"What's the rush?" Sparky asked coldly. There had been avoidance in his manner since Marty had brought Silent Bill's letter to his room. He had begun to feel that, one way or another, he had been made a victim of his battery-mate's tongue.

"Buck Olsen's outside," Marty panted.

The coldness was succeeded by a look of suspicion. "What is this, a job?"

"Good grief, will you hurry? How could it be a job? Hurry! He hasn't much time."

And still Sparky did not move.

Inspiration seized Marty. "You don't have to take my word it's Buck. You've seen the photograph in my room a hundred times. You'll recognize him at once. There's a man waiting outside and that man is Buck Olsen. Do you want to talk to him or don't you?"

The pitcher stared, and sucked in his breath, and began to work feverishly at the laces of his shoes.

The locker-room was almost deserted. Jimmy Blake was still closeted with Darcow behind the locked door. Buck stepped on the starter as they came up toward the car, but Sparky halted on the sidewalk and gave the man a long, devouring look.

"You are Buck Olsen," he said.

"Buck Olsen himself," the former star of the Panthers said genially. His eyes roamed over the pitcher appraisingly. "So you're the Sparky Marty's been telling me about, eh?"

Sparky could only nod.

"Shake."

Sparky grasped the outstretched hand. The grip of fingers gnarled and

broken by foul tips made him wince.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Olsen."

"Well, I won't say I'm glad to be at this spot, you understand? No man likes to get a can tied to him even when he ain't got it coming his way. Just the same, I'm glad to be able to do a little job for a buddy. Hop in."

The boys crowded in alongside the catcher. Marty kept the bat between his knees out of the way of the gear-shift lever. He could feel Sparky trembling beside him.

"Buck," he said, "if we could keep this workout a secret----"

"I get you," said Buck. "What nobody sees nobody knows nothing about." He drove rapidly to the outskirts of the town and slowed at a vacant field. "How will this do, kid?"

"Fine," said Marty.

The brakes squealed and the car came to a sudden stop. "Sure this is all right?"

"Couldn't be better."

"O. K. You're the boss. You warm him up and when he's ready I'll look him over."

This was the moment of rigid decision. This was where Sparky Woods came back to life or else was finished for good. Marty's left hand sweated inside the heavy leather mitt. Sparky's fight to make a come-back was his fight. Today would mark him with finality as either a pitcher wrecker or a pitcher saver!

The grass was high. He trod it down and paced off the pitching distance. Sparky began to throw. Wild, tremulous hope, cold, clutching fear ran through him in succeeding tides and ruined his judgment. The ball appeared to come toward him through a wavering haze. Was Sparky better or was he worse? He couldn't so much as hazard a guess.

Marty heard the door of a car bang. He looked back and saw Buck walking toward them. The catcher spoke to Sparky.

"Ready to go? Don't rush it if you ain't right. How does the old soup-bone feel?"

"Loose, Mr. Olsen."

"'Mister Olsen,' the catcher mimicked in good-humor, and winked at Marty. "Where do you get that 'Mister?' I'm Buck, Sparky; Buck to any friend of Marty's." He held out his hand for the mitt. "O. K. I'll take him now."

The mitt was a boy's mitt. Buck tried to squirm his hand into the recess. The mitt did not come all the way to the heel of his hand.

"I must be getting fat, eh?" Buck grinned. "Maybe that was the matter with me with the Panthers, fat in the head. Maybe I've got enough mitt here to take your speed anyway, Sparky."

Sparky laughed, nervously.

Marty couldn't stand the strain of watching and went to the parked car. He lifted the hood and pretended to examine the motor minutely as though completely absorbed.

And yet his ears caught every echo of a ball spanking into a mitt. Was Sparky back with his old speed and was Buck using his trick of making a pitch sound like a rifle bullet? The team had been bad against Glenwood--terribly bad. If Sparky failed to tie all his loose ends of strings together---

Buck's voice came to him in the familiar hoarse, urging drone: "Give it to papa, baby. Make it smooth. Syrup on hot cakes. Yah! That's the way to give it to papa."

Again the ball smacked sharply.

Marty could stand the anxiety, the suspense, no longer. Good or bad, he had to know the verdict.

He closed the hood and snapped the latches. But before he reached Buck the workout was over. So soon?

His steps lagged drearily. To his apprehensive mind the shortness of the workout, its sudden termination, could have only one meaning--failure. Sparky was evidently so bad that Buck Olsen, big-league catcher, didn't think it necessary to waste time on him.

Buck had to pull to get the mitt off. Marty held the glove in a rigid grasp. Sparky, white about the lips, walked forward through patches of the high grass to meet them.

"Kid," said Buck to Sparky, "that's a mighty nice ball. Yes, sir. Mighty nice and sweet."

Marty swallowed. "Buck, we can't afford to have any misunderstandings. Put it in plain English so we'll both know. What do you mean by nice and sweet?"

Buck gave him an affectionate, tolerant glance. "Too bad I won't be with the Panthers next summer. You ought to take another trip and let me learn you some more. Kid, on that one you certainly over-slid the bag a whole mile."

The rigid grip tightened. "Which way, Buck?"

"Did you ever hear tell of anybody oversliding a bag the right way? There ain't no right way. You're supposed to go into it and stay there. Listen to me and get it straight. This kid Sparky's all there, for money or for marbles."

The mitt slipped out of the rigid grasp. Marty let it lie where it fell.

"The real thing, Buck?"

"I'm telling you. If he didn't have a thing but that whizzer he'd be plenty dangerous. As it is he has a couple of other nice curves and that gives him some more. Anybody who's been telling him to bear down hard with that fast ball has been speaking plenty of baseball language, and don't make no mistake

about it. All his catcher has to do is to call for one of those other curves now and then to keep the batters off balance.”

The ice in his spine was gone in a rush of relief, and a slow, delicious tingle ran through Marty’s nerves. He stole a glance at Sparky and saw a look on the pitcher’s face he had not seen there for weeks.

“You listening to that, Sparky?” he cried.

“Ask Buck to say it again,” said Sparky.

Buck said it again.

And then, as the full and complete realization of all that this meant came to Marty, he leaped into the air and let out a yell.

“Buck,” he shouted, “I feel so good I could wham you one. I feel like going nuts. We owe you something--something big. Don’t we, Sparky, old boy?”

Sparky’s eyes were eloquent.

Marty bent down for the mitt and remembered the bat lying back in the car. “What did we bring it along for, Buck?”

“I thought maybe I’d have this boy throw up a couple of hot ones to a batter.”

Marty was all eagerness. “If you want me to get the bat, Buck----”

“It ain’t necessary, kid. The handwriting was on that ball and the handwriting said ‘Good.’ Like I told you before, he’s got plenty of stuff.” They were at the car and Buck slid in behind the wheel. “How about coming over to Linwood Saturday and seeing the game? After cutting at those big babies in the league these semi-pro pitchers ought to be cherries. Maybe I’ll knock out a couple of boards from the fence.”

“We have a game for Saturday, Buck.”

“You play every Saturday?”

“No; sometimes on Friday, sometimes on Saturday.”

“O. K. Then you can run over some other Saturday. Maybe I can fix it so you and Sparky can sit on the bench. So long until I see you some more. Don’t trip over nobody’s ash-cans.”

The roadster roared down the road.

The boys stood there and watched the car disappear around a distant bend. They turned in silence, and in silence walked back toward the Arrowhead campus.

Suddenly Sparky Woods found his voice. Sentences poured from his lips in an eager stream. All at once, as he grew conscious of his companion’s silence, he stopped.

“What’s the matter with you, Marty?”

“Nothing,” Marty said dreamily.

“You haven’t opened your mouth in ten minutes. Do you think Buck Olsen

is wrong? Did he tell you something he didn't tell me?"

"How could he? You were there all the time."

"But big leaguers have signs to each other----"

"Wake up!" said Marty. His lips formed into a twisted smile. "I wanted to hear you go gabbing along a mile a minute. It's the first time I've heard you rattle on like that in weeks."

"It's the first time I wanted to," Sparky admitted.

Marty's heart leaped. "Keep going, Sparky; don't stop. Keep right on. It's music."

Tonight no victory fire burned upon the campus. A line of boys trickled along the walk that skirted the library, and by this Marty knew the crowd was bound downtown to a movie. The dining-hall was dark.

"Boy," he moaned, "we've just about done ourselves out of some supper. I'm starved. I crave nourishment. This has been a big day and I'm going to take you and buy you some food."

"Kid," said Sparky, trying to imitate Buck's hoarse, husky tones, "when I'm a buddy I'm a buddy. I'm going to buy yours."

They pounded each other roughly in an ecstasy of joy.

An hour later they separated in the dormitory hall. Whistling gayly, Marty walked toward his room. Everything was all right now. Tomorrow Sparky would take a turn in the batting practice. He looked forward to seeing the faces of Darcow and Jimmy Blake when Sparky began to shoot the ball and turn on the heat.

Still whistling, he opened the door of his room. Then he stopped dead upon the threshold.

Darcow sat quietly upon the window seat.

"Waiting long?" Marty asked.

"About an hour and a half," the coach said dryly. "I'd have nipped out of here long ago, but it was imperative that I see you tonight. Once here, I decided to stay. Does it always take you this long to stroll back from the dining-hall?"

"I didn't go to the dining-hall."

"What!" The coach remembered how listless he had been of late. "Not passing up meals?"

"No, sir. I ate outside."

"Oh! Ordinarily I don't like that, Marty, but---- You ought to know enough, from your association with your father's players, not to load up with junk. I want to have a talk with you."

"About what?"

"Sparky."

Marty closed the door eagerly. That's what he wanted to talk about, too.

He reached for a chair and pushed it across the room toward the window-seat.

"I told you a few days ago," Darcow said, studying the tips of his fingers, "that Sparky would come back. Since then I've had a powwow with him. Not about baseball, however. I kept away from that subject. We talked about a dozen different matters. I wanted to study him off the field when he didn't have baseball on his mind; at close range. Preferably, in his own room, away from everybody."

That, Marty decided, must have been the night the hall lamps dimmed and he followed Darcow up the stairs.

"I still say Sparky will come back," Darcow went on.

Marty hitched the chair forward. "Swell! Now you're talking."

"But it won't be this season," the coach said.

Marty's jaw fell open. He looked at that moment like a fish yanked out of water, and lying on a grassy bank and gasping for air.

"Sparky's worrying," Darcow went on. "You can see it every day on the field. He started to worry as soon as I walked in on him. By and by, though, when there was no talk of baseball, he relaxed. That was when I woke up."

Marty waited.

"He must be taken away from everything that suggests the worry. If he stays around with the squad his failure is held up before him every day. If he pitches and loses the sore spot becomes sorer. He has no chance to wash from his mind a bad night-mare. And so----" The coach looked up. "I'm going to have a friendly talk with him and make him see that it is better for him to quit for the present. Next season he'll come out with his mind washed clean."

So that was how it was! Marty was out of the chair. "But you can't drop him, Coach. Not now."

"No?" The man's voice was surprised. "Aren't you the one who's been telling me that he can't win?"

"That was before this afternoon. I'm talking about now. Now he's himself again. His stuff is back. He has everything. He'd never have lost it only I--I---"

Now it was Darcow who was on his feet.

"I'm beginning to get a slant on this. You always did like to spin the top your own way, didn't you? Come into me standing up, Marty. No ducking. What did you do to Sparky?"

"I--I convinced him he couldn't win with that fast ball," Marty Gage said in a small, strained, thin voice.

CHAPTER VI

Sparky Gets a Call

Twilight settled over the almost deserted campus and dusky shadows filled the room. Somewhere on the floor voices sounded, a door closed and the voices were gone. Running feet drummed along a campus walk. The tooting of an automobile horn, mellowed by distance, echoed from one of the streets that skirted the school grounds.

There wasn't much light in the room, but in what little light there was Marty could see stern ominous lines in the coach's face. The passing minutes seemed an eternity. The coach was like a man fighting an inner battle that shook him deeply. The quiet of the room was like the moment of profound hush that comes before the smashing rush of a storm. Good grief, why didn't Darcow say something and get the agony over with?

Darcow was not yet ready to talk. First he had to get himself under control. He had always made allowances; he had always realized, with a sense of sympathy, that he was dealing with Marty Gage, son of Silent Bill Gage. Marty Gage, who had rubbed elbows with big leaguers and had developed big ideas. He tried to remember it now. Until he had it before him where he would not forget it, it were best not to speak. Anger would do little good. Not even justified anger.

The picture, as a whole, was reasonably clear. Details were lacking, but the picture itself was there. He wondered, in a sort of amazement, why he had not suspected what was happening. Was his brain growing dull? Marty had repeatedly protested to him the use of the fast ball, and Marty had never been one to be chary with suggestions and advice. He might have known that the boy wouldn't keep his confident opinions to himself. Hadn't he protested, at least once, before the battery men?

"Turn on the light," the man said at last.

Marty touched a button.

"Sit down. This may take a long time."

Marty sat down. A long time sounded ominous. He was in for it. Well, he reflected dismally, he had brought this on himself.

"We're going to start at the beginning," Darcow said, "and go right through. No jumping spots; everything. We opened the season against Hastings, and Sparky didn't last out an inning. In fact, Sparky came off the mound before a single man was out. I expected him to take that game without working up a hard sweat. Did you have a hand in what happened to him?"

Marty moistened his lips. "Yes, sir."

"What?"

"Well, you and Jimmy were all for having Sparky pitch that whole game relying on his speed. I didn't say anything at the time, but after Jimmy and Sparky left----"

"Left what?"

"Your office."

"Wait a minute. Let's start with everything clear. You're speaking now of the conference we had in the gym office the afternoon before the game with Hastings?"

Marty nodded.

"Sparky was full of confidence that day. I was a little afraid that he may have overheard one or two sentences you dropped about during practice. I made it a point to question him. I wanted to be sure he was in the right frame of mind. He told me that he thought the fast one was his one best bet."

Marty said nothing.

"You mean that, despite the fact that he was ready and full of faith, you deliberately set out, after that conference, to feed him advice that would crack him up?"

"I didn't want to crack him up."

"You did, didn't you?"

"But I thought----"

"I know," Darcow said wearily. "You'll tell me, I suppose, that your intentions were good. Did it ever occur to you that a lot of trouble is caused in this world by mistaken fools whose intentions were all for the best? Never mind; go on. You were saying that after Jimmy and Sparky left----"

"After they left I told you how I felt about that ball. I couldn't see how he could get through on a single ace delivery. You practically told me that traveling with the Panthers hadn't been the best thing for me and that I thought I knew too much."

"Did I?" Darcow's voice was sarcastic.

Marty gulped.

"And of course that opinion of mine got under your sensitive skin and boiled you up?"

"Y--yes," said Marty. "I didn't know you were right and it made me sore that you wouldn't listen to me. If you wouldn't pay any attention to me, I thought there was only one thing for me to do, and so I--I went to----" He stopped.

"I suppose you mean you went to Sparky?"

"Yes, sir."

"Behind my back?"

Marty nodded again and dared not look at the coach.

“Just what valuable advice from the big leagues,” Darcow asked coldly, “did you give him?”

“I told him exactly what I had told you--that if a pitcher didn’t mix them up he was lost. I told him that it was impossible for a one-ball man to last; that by and by they’d begin to time his speed. After that they’d lay back and kill it.”

“I see. In other words, Sparky accepted your judgment and rejected mine.”

The question frightened Marty badly for it opened up a possibility that had escaped him. There was a grim suggestion that the coach’s anger might broaden out and take in Sparky, too. He didn’t want that. He had hurt Sparky far too much already.

“He wasn’t taking it as straight from me, Coach. I told him that I had been told by Buck Olsen.”

“Then he rejected his own coach and took Buck as a guide?”

“That wasn’t his fault,” Marty pleaded. “I suppose he was so awed by Buck being a league catcher----”

“Big league wind,” Darcow said. “It has certainly played havoc with Arrowhead this season. No wonder Sparky Woods didn’t last out the first inning.”

“I thought I was right,” Marty pleaded. “I wasn’t trying to wreck Sparky or to knife you.”

“Probably Buck Olsen thought he was right when he was sticking a knife in your father’s ribs,” Darcow said.

Marty felt the stupefying impact of a dull wonder. So Darcow knew that! And the truth had been so closely guarded that his father had given it to him in confidence. How had Darcow learned? And then a new thought came and he was taut with a new fear. His father had thrown Buck off the club. Cast him adrift. What Buck had done was so bad that no other club wanted him. Suppose Darcow decided on the same course? Suppose Darcow dropped him from the team? Whether or not that happened, Sparky Woods had to stay.

“If Sparky had doubts,” Darcow asked, “why didn’t he come to me?”

Marty could almost see the rope tightening around Sparky’s throat. “I don’t know,” he said helplessly. “If you were a schoolboy catcher, and if somebody gave you advice that came straight from Buck Olsen----”

“Never mind,” the coach interrupted. “We can go into that later. As a matter of fact, I’m sure we’ll go into that later. Did you give Sparky any more valuable information?”

“I thought it was valuable.”

“What was it?”

“I told him that, after the game had gone on to about the fifth inning, you’d--you’d----” The words stuck.

“I’d what?”

The boy decided to leave nothing out. “I told him that you’d come to your senses.”

“Did you? That was charitable. I’ve been wondering for the last fifteen minutes whether I had any sense. What did you mean by telling him I’d come to my senses?”

“I had it all figured out that when Hastings began to pound him everybody would see it was a mistake to depend upon one delivery. I couldn’t see how he could go beyond the fifth inning with the fast ball. I told him that, by the time the fifth inning arrived, you’d tell him to pitch the same kind of game he pitched all during last season and mix them up.”

“You and Jimmy had a run-in after that game.”

“We’re always having run-ins,” Marty blurted.

“That’s Jimmy’s fault of course,” Darcow said with a return of sarcasm. “As I remember it now, you, Jimmy and I were walking toward the dressing-room. You told me you had expected Sparky to take it, and Jimmy rode you about more big league wind. I decided that it was nothing more than the case of a good pitcher having a bad day. I told that to you and Jimmy. I also predicted that he’d be himself again the next time out. I suppose you went to Sparky and told him that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There wasn’t very much you forgot to tell him, was there? All right; you went sneaking to him with the story. That’s the word, Marty; sneaking. What did he say?”

Marty could see where the answer he must give would lead. “He said he could see where he was in for a pleasant season.”

The storm of anger that Darcow had suppressed arose to shake him. He waited for the storm to die. It took self-control to wait. He had the whole drama before him; he could see it clearly in every line, in every small detail. With courage gone, with no hope left for the future, Sparky had become a target for the team at the batting-cage. The wonder was not that he had been beaten by Longwood, but that he had lasted as long as the third inning.

“It would seem,” Darcow said, in a voice that he managed to keep flat and level, “that I am inflicted with a pitcher and a catcher who are both about equally useless.”

There was no misunderstanding what that might mean. Marty’s throat went dry. He was hoarse when he spoke.

“Ditch me if you want to,” he pleaded, “but don’t throw out Sparky. He’s got everything. His confidence is back; he’s full of pep. This afternoon Buck Olsen----”

“Who?” Darcow shot the word.

“Buck Olsen.”

“Do you mean to tell me Sparky has been writing to Buck for advice?”

“No, sir. Buck was here.”

“Here at Arrowhead?”

Marty nodded.

“When?”

“This afternoon.”

“By appointment?”

“No, sir. Nobody knew Buck was to be here. He’s to catch for the Linwood club Saturday. He came over to see me, and I had been trying to straighten Sparky out before that, and----”

“Hold on. You’re going too fast. I thought I had the whole story, but apparently there are still hidden angles. You were trying to straighten Sparky out. You were telling him that your earlier advice had been wrong?”

“I told him that.”

“How does it happen that Marty Gage arrived at the remarkable conclusion that Marty Gage could be wrong?”

Marty winced. “I had a letter from my father----”

“This gets worse,” Darcow snapped. “You mean that you went over my head and wrote to your father? After his experience with Buck I’d imagine your father would be the last one to give you any undercover advice----”

“I didn’t write to my father for advice,” Marty cried. Lord, what a mess this was getting to be! “I wrote to my father, but I only asked him why the Panthers couldn’t hit their stride. That was before anybody knew about Buck. My father told me there were some wrinkles to be ironed out and then the club would start winning. He also asked me what had happened to Sparky because, when he was here at Thanksgiving, I had told him Sparky was to have a good season. He told me that a fast, high, inshoot was about the best ball a prep school pitcher could have.”

Darcow said: “I beg your pardon, Marty for what I said about your father. Any man who knows Bill Gage should know better. What did you do with that letter?”

“I took it to Sparky.”

“Thinking it would straighten him out?”

“It didn’t. He was too far sunk. He said that Buck should know more about it than my father because Buck was a catcher. I knew then that nobody could save him but Buck.”

“What happened after that?” Darcow asked curiously. “Did you try to get Buck to come out here?”

“I tried to get word to Buck so that Buck would write a letter. I had written to Buck. I wanted to show it to Sparky so he wouldn’t think it was a plot.

Before I mailed it--while I was waiting to find Sparky so I could mail it--the news came over the radio that Buck had been released. It looked then as though I had put my foot in so completely that I couldn't get it out, because I didn't know where I could reach Buck. I guess I was sunk about as deep as Sparky."

Darcow understood at last the boy's sudden listlessness at practice. Worry! Moving Heaven and earth in an attempt to right a wrong. A corner of the man softened.

"When did Buck get here, before or after today's game?"

"It must have been after. Joe Tuthill left the locker-room and Buck was waiting out in the street. Joe called in that there was a man outside who wanted to see me. As soon as I saw Buck I told him about Sparky. Buck was fine. He said to get Sparky and he'd look him over. So the three of us rode out to a field and Buck had Sparky pitch to him."

Despite the iron self-control Darcow felt a pulse throbbing some place in his throat.

"What did Buck say?"

"He said Sparky was there--that his fast ball was good enough to win games all by itself and that with his other curves to throw now and then there shouldn't be any question."

"How about Sparky?"

"Sparky believes it because it comes from Buck. He's all ready to go. Please, Darcow, don't drop him from the team now. Not now. Not when he's got back his nerve and is ready."

The room settled into silence. Darcow walked to the window and looked down at the campus, black with darkness save where a lamp threw a circle of pale radiance over a patch of walk and a width of lawn. He spoke over his shoulder:

"You'd better get a bite to eat."

"I had something to eat."

"Yes. That's right. I forgot. Well, clear out of here for ten or fifteen minutes. I want to think."

"What are you going to do with Sparky?"

"I'm trying to decide what I'm going to do with you," the coach said grimly.

"What about Sparky?"

Darcow's voice became steel. "Trying to make another stab at running an Arrowhead team?"

Marty said steadily: "You know I'm not. I'm trying to tell you that Sparky's changed. He's ready."

"Out," the coach said shortly.

The boy walked out of the room.

Downstairs he patrolled the campus and his mood was glum. Was it only a few weeks ago that the sun had shone brightly and there wasn't a cloud in his sky? What a tragedy it would be if, after staggering through the season, Sparky were punished at the moment he was ready to soar back to his old heights. For himself he had no self-pity. If Darcow gave him the ax he would have no one to blame but himself.

What a fine story that would be to send to the father who had released Buck Olsen! It had been hard to tell the miserable story to Darcow; it would be harder still to tell it to Bill Gage.

A form crossed the street that bounded the campus carrying writing pads under one arm. He recognized Sparky's jubilant stride. He had no desire, at the moment, to meet the pitcher. On one point he was certain. Regardless of what happened to him, Sparky wasn't to be tossed out. Sparky didn't deserve it. Sparky hadn't done anything except to accept without question a lot of rancid advice.

He started across the campus grass. Unthinkingly, he passed under the radiance of one of the lamps. Sparky came running after him.

"Marty!"

He quickened his pace.

"Marty! Wait a minute. Marty!"

There was nothing for Marty to do but stop. Even this attempt to hide had gone against him.

"Why all the rush?" Sparky demanded. "What's the idea of running away from me?"

"I wasn't running away from you."

"I called you twice."

"I guess I didn't hear you the first time." The catcher started to move away.

"What's eating you, Marty? What's the rush?" The pitcher's voice tightened. "Did Buck send you some word?"

Marty sighed. "If you must know, Darcow's waiting in my room. I'm due back there."

"It won't kill him to wait another minute, will it?"

"This is a little different," Marty said slowly. "He's found out why you haven't been winning."

A boy came along one of the walks and disappeared into a dormitory building. Under the campus lamp Marty could see all the high spirits drain out of Sparky in a single, sagging rush.

"Does he know about what you told me?"

"He knows everything."

"And about Buck being here this afternoon?"

“Didn’t I tell you he knew everything?” Marty demanded impatiently. His nerves were on edge.

“Good night!” Sparky groaned. “If you’re through where am I without my catcher?”

“You don’t need any particular catcher,” Marty told him gruffly. “You have your stuff.”

“Suppose you did ball things up,” Sparky burst out. “You straightened them out again didn’t you?”

“They should never have been balled up to start with,” Marty said in gloom.

Talk didn’t help matters. Darcow had the final word, and Darcow was sitting upstairs.

“I’d better go in and get it over with,” the catcher said.

Meanwhile, back in the dormitory room, Darcow had come to a decision after long minutes of debate.

It had been a hard decision to reach, calling for a large measure of stern self-control. The man was only human. A season’s work had been pretty well ruined and his disappointed soul called out for punishment for the despoiler of a team. And yet he was dealing with Marty Gage. That was something he could not forget.

If this had been any other player, Darcow’s punishment would have been swift and conclusive. But where impetuous Marty was concerned, there was no way you could escape making allowances. Marty Gage, whose close-lipped father managed the Panthers; Marty Gage, who traveled for months at a time with big leaguers and thought he was a big-leaguer, too. The thought that had checked the coach’s wrath more than once tonight checked it again. Too many big-league ideas rolling around in one boy’s head.

Darcow sighed and went back to the window seat. He was sitting there when he heard Sparky’s first cry of “Marty!” He looked down at the campus, but all he could make out were two black forms. Two boys who had manufactured trouble for him all season standing with their heads together. He wished that they had not met--not at this moment, anyway.

His mind continued to twist and turn his problem. You had to take into account the fact that Marty had been thrown into contact with a world that was far beyond his years. It wasn’t a world that made baseball a sport. It was a world that took its bread and butter from baseball and made baseball an intensive business, a science and a profession. A world of men who, if they didn’t play baseball successfully, didn’t eat.

Darcow could see, with photographic clarity, the catcher’s befogged, warped, impulsive, twisted point of view. He had never heard Buck’s contemptuous expression of “Pink-tea baseball,” and yet he could realize how,

to the boy, a coach who had never been a big leaguer might appear to be lacking in divine insight. Accepting Buck Olsen as a mentor, Marty had never for a moment doubted, never questioned. Believing the advice he gave Sparky was correct, he had thought of nothing but setting the pitcher right. And, having found that he was wrong, he had as promptly tried to undo the damage he had done. In a way this was what might be called square-shooting.

The man appreciated the sincere honesty of the act. He valued, too, in its true proportions, the fact that Marty had pleaded desperately for Sparky but had asked no leniency for himself. In the last analysis, it was this that swung the scales in the coach's mind and led him to a decision. What were you going to do with a lad who took his punishment and only asked mercy for another?

Darcow shook his head and wondered if any other coach had ever had a problem like this.

Marty, coming back to the room, found him still at the window seat. The boy closed the door without a sound and came slowly across the room to the study table. Darcow did not look at him. A clock on the table ticked loudly. Abruptly the man spoke without turning his head.

"Did you see Sparky?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told him, of course?"

"Yes; I told him."

"Didn't it occur to you the information might not help a pitcher who was only on the threshold of coming back?" The coach turned squarely about on the seat. "Are you ever going to forget that you have a tongue?"

So he had done the wrong thing again! Eyes, that could be so blandly irritating, were full of misery.

"I tried to get away from him," he explained. "But Sparky saw me and ran across the campus after me. If you do drop me, he'd know it tomorrow, anyway, wouldn't he?"

"If?"

Marty's last shred of hope disappeared.

"Why the 'if'? Can you think of any just reason why I should hold on to you?"

"No." The boy spoke with a visible effort.

"Neither can I." The man stood up and, with an appearance of stern judgment, walked to the table. "Marty, your father's as great a manager as the game has ever produced. I said something to you before that I'll say again. I wonder if he did a wise job of personal managing when he allowed you to knock around the country, week after week, with the Panthers?"

Marty sprang instantly to the defense of Silent Bill Gage. "My father saw that danger!"

“Oh! Did he?”

“He spoke about it before I came back to school. He said if I didn’t have the stuff in me to stand up with the wind in my ears, I’d probably fall down later, anyway.”

“You were a particular buddy of Buck’s?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m wondering if it might be possible he had Buck Olsen in mind when he said that.”

The boy reddened. “He said he had been thinking of pulling me loose from Buck.”

“I beg your pardon, Marty. That’s the second time tonight I’ve misjudged your father. I should have known better. I’m taking a chance on judging you, though, because I have nothing to go by but the past. The past is pretty bad. You’ve always been too fond of airing your own opinions regardless of whether you stepped on another person’s toes. I ought to drop you so fast your head would spin for a week. And yet, perhaps you’re not entirely to blame.”

Marty waited in an agony of suspense. He did not dare to hope.

“I wonder,” Darcow said slowly, “if you’ve learned a lesson you’re not going to forget.”

“Try me,” the catcher begged.

The coach contemplated the photograph of Buck Olsen. The man’s pose was, in itself, a swagger. He radiated a vitality, an unquestioned confidence. Exactly the type to capture a fervid boy’s imagination.

“If I do----”

Again there was that agony of wait, that torture of uncertainty.

“Three persons know what tripped Arrowhead,” Darcow went on. “Those three are you, Sparky and me. There’s no reason why anyone else should know, and that includes Jimmy Blake. This is Jimmy’s year as captain; this is Jimmy’s team. He’s never been enraptured by your oratory, Marty, and I hesitate to think what might happen if he knew some of the tricks you’ve pulled this season. A wild row might start a backfire, and this team is in no shape for any more upsets. As for Sparky being right, there’s no way of guessing whether or not he is. Something may be gone from him that doesn’t show on the surface. Emotions are peculiarly uncertain; a latch may have slipped. He may appear to have everything and in reality have nothing.”

“Buck caught him. Buck says he’s right.”

Darcow’s face darkened.

“I’m not trying to throw Buck at you again. But when he warms up pitchers he’s supposed to know what man’s in the best condition to start.”

“And of course,” the coach said tartly, “he never makes mistakes. The man he picks as the man for that day’s game always comes through and is never

clouded out of the box.”

Marty had no reply to that.

“Sparky’s warm-up with Buck was practice pitching,” Darcow went on. “I’ve known more than one pitcher who was a wow in practice and an ouch in a game. There’s a difference when there’s a batter crouched at the plate, and two runners edging off the bases, and the batter all set to slip you poison. The pitcher who hasn’t a nerve in practice may be all nerves when he faces battle.”

Marty knew that. And yet he felt that he had to say something for Sparky.

“He wasn’t even a shell pitching to our own men at the batting-cage,” he argued.

Still a little windy, Darcow thought. The coach did not expect miracles. Probably the boy would always lean a little toward wind. Not a particularly bad baseball trait if it didn’t go too far. The player who talked the thing up during a game was usually a player on his toes. The coach looked again at the photograph of the catcher who had been released by the Panthers while still in his prime and waived out of big league baseball.

“I’m keeping you, Marty,” he said abruptly.

The breath went out of Marty in a long, slow sigh.

“I may be making a mistake. Only the future can give the answer to that. It’s up to you to prove to me that I’m doing the right thing.”

Marty’s eyes were eloquent of what he intended to do. “How about Sparky?” he demanded.

“Leave Sparky to me.”

The answer wasn’t satisfactory, but it would have to do.

There was a smart rap upon the door. “Hi there, Marty!” The door opened and revealed Sparky. He looked both startled and surprised.

“Hello, Sparky,” Darcow said genially.

Sparky came in uncertainly. “I--I thought you had left, Coach.” His gaze, hot with questioning, went to Marty. What he read in the catcher’s face must have satisfied him. A fleeting, relieved grin came to his lips.

“I’ll be running along,” said Darcow. He was conscious of a small sense of astonishment that this interview, begun in a strain of anger should have ended on this note of understanding. Well, that was coaching; you ran into situations that appeared to be unsolvable and took a blind stab at trying to solve them. On his way to the door he stopped beside the pitcher; one hand fell on the boy’s shoulder.

“Quite an earthquake, wasn’t it, Sparky?”

Sparky didn’t quite know what to say to that.

“Why didn’t you come to me while the storm was raging?”

Sparky looked frightened.

“After this, when in doubt, dig in your spikes and come loping for

headquarters. That's the place to pick up your information. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"How are you feeling?"

"Great."

Darcow's mind worked fast. The boy looked great. The downcast aspect, the dejection of the past few weeks had completely disappeared. Here was a soul revitalized. There was a new warmth in the eyes, a new ring of life to the voice.

"That's fine," the man said with a smile. "When a good pitcher feels great it's usually down in the books that he's due to work a few great games. Arrowhead can stand some of that."

He went on toward the door. At the threshold he paused.

"You'd better tell him, Marty, about the need for secrecy. Just as a matter of precaution."

"I'll tell him."

"And Sparky?"

"Yes, Coach."

"I'm working you Saturday against Mott Haven."

After that, casually, Darcow passed out into the corridor.

Back in the room Marty wanted to break loose and throw things around. But Darcow was still within earshot and it might not be good policy to stage a wild celebration. The coach might expect two players, saved from the ax, to practice a subdued, respectful, even thankful, decorum. He made a frantic motion to Sparky and Sparky closed the door.

Then Marty contented himself with running jubilant fingers through his red hair. "Sparky, old boy, did you hear that?"

"Every word of it," said Sparky. He went through his wind-up and hurled an imaginary ball toward an imaginary batter. And Marty brought his hands together with a resounding slap to represent the impact of the ball against the mitt.

They stood there grinning at each other.

"What a perfectly rotten time those Mott Haven boys are going to have next Saturday," Marty gurgled.

The pitcher made a sudden motion. "What about you? Canned?"

"No."

"Isn't Darcow a peach?" Sparky breathed.

Darcow, going slowly down the dormitory stairs, had a different theory. Darcow wondered if he might not be a prune.

Had he been wise or foolish? Was it foolish to promise Sparky the game without first waiting to see what he might show in practice? Would it help him along to know that he was going back to the firing-line and that his coach,

despite all that had happened, had complete faith in his ability to win?

The man knew he had been principally influenced by the boy's eyes and his voice. After all, a pitcher does not throw a baseball either with eyes or voice. But they help.

And there was still another influence--necessity.

If Sparky had victories in his arm, the quicker he shook one of them out the quicker a dismayed, disorganized infield would rally, the quicker a shattered team would recover its morale and climb to where it rightfully belonged.

On the other hand, if Sparky were only a shining mirage, if he crumpled up again--Darcow knew the answer to that only too well. Another collapse would mark the end. Arrowhead might just as well tuck her bats away. Of course, the team would play out its schedule, but the only question would have to do with how badly Arrowhead would be beaten.

To Sparky and Marty, rejoicing in the catcher's room, Mott Haven was their joint chance.

To Darcow, wondering what the unknown future held, the game meant the make-or-break of a season.

CHAPTER VII

Faltering Steps

Darcow, after sleeping on the case of Sparky Woods, awoke in the morning in a more optimistic frame of mind.

Why worry whether Sparky would return as an effective pitcher? There was as much chance of success as of failure. To begin with, Sparky was good. That was the foundation stone. A good pitcher, losing his ability to win not through any fault of his own but through poor advice, might be counted on to regain his form the moment he realized that he *was* good but had been badly advised. The shock of discovery, the relief to a harassed mind, might well work a miracle. There was a chance that Sparky would be better than he had been before his crash.

Darcow ate a good breakfast and went off in search of Jimmy Blake. He met the captain on his way to a nine o'clock class.

"Time to spare, Jimmy?"

"Five minutes."

"Five minutes will be plenty. I've been thinking about Mott Haven."

The captain grunted. "That must have been a pleasant thought."

"We have to think of it. They'll be here Saturday. Mott Haven's a tough spot. Seen their batting averages?"

Jimmy scowled.

"Those boys can hit. Four of them above .300, two of them around .290. What do you think of Joe Tuthill?"

"After what happened to him yesterday?" the captain asked.

"Of course," Darcow agreed, "that's a consideration. Then, again, he probably wouldn't be in shape to go back Saturday. Not enough rest between games. That leaves Joe Tuthill out."

Jimmy Blake's scowl turned to a harassed, worried frown. What was the matter with Darcow? Today he took the team's battery problems almost with flippancy.

"You don't think we could trust that game to Bud Moran?"

Jimmy threw up his hands.

"That seems to leave us with nobody but Sparky Woods."

"Sparky?" the captain cried, aghast.

"Have we anybody else?"

"But in your office yesterday we decided to turn Sparky loose for the rest of the season."

"I've changed my mind," Darcow said easily. Overnight he had not changed one decision--he still thought it best to tell Jimmy nothing of the causes that had wrecked the pitcher. And his air of lightness was a calculated pose. He wanted to shake the captain and fill him with a few hours of alarm. Perhaps, if Sparky went good in practice today, the effect on Jimmy would be all the more pronounced.

"You changed your mind suddenly," Jimmy said, watching the man closely.

"Yes; I did. Did you ever have a hunch? I have one. I have a feeling that Sparky's going to surprise us."

The captain accepted this with a hard tightening of the lips. He had never cared for Marty's gab, but now the weeks of having to listen to the catcher wore on him. He remembered the times when, subtly, the catcher had insinuated that Darcow was running on the wrong track. Had Marty been right all the time? Had Darcow lost his head? Was sending Sparky into a game the way to rebuild the heart of a slipping team? And as for Sparky coming back----

That, Jimmy told himself, was an impossibility. One, at least, of Marty's predictions had come home in front. Marty had insisted from the start that Sparky couldn't win. Sparky hadn't won. The boy looked at Darcow again, this time queerly, and wondered if Marty had been right from the beginning and the coach entirely wrong.

"If my hunch is right," Darcow said, unperturbed, "he ought to show us something this afternoon."

That afternoon Jimmy Blake saw Sparky put on a show and saw the Arrowhead batters put in a lean and sad afternoon. They crowded up to the batting-cage in an eager line anxious to take a crack at a ball they had been murdering. They took toe holds and swung--and missed. Balls slithered down into the dirt, balls popped weakly into the air. But very few of Sparky's pitches went screaming toward the outfield with the power of a clean smash behind them.

Jimmy Blake sent a word of warning down the line. Boys stopped swinging and began to choke their bats and take a quick, sharp cut at the ball. And still they continued to hit weak rollers along the ground or to pop weak flies into the air.

"What's the matter?" Jimmy cried to them. "Have you all lost your eyes?"

Marty, catching, gave a secret grin and steered a wise, shrewd course. Not too much of the fast ball. Not yet. First let Sparky find himself. And so he carried the pitcher along quietly and slowly, and saw him strengthen perceptibly as the batting practice wore on. Toward the end Sparky was piling up strikes.

Jimmy Blake, refusing to believe the miracle, could not see the wisdom of

leaning on a broken rod. True, the rod had held today but it was probably a rod split where the split could not be seen. Today was probably an accident.

“Accident?” Darcow asked.

Jimmy was like a goaded man who knew he was right but was unable to prove the truth. “What else could it be but an accident?” he spat out.

“If it were an accident,” Darcow asked, “does it strike you as strange that I should have had a hunch that this was going to happen?”

That was something of a poser. Jimmy fell back upon an old and time-tried alibi.

“We were in a hitting slump.”

Marty, who had kept out of the discussion, could keep out no longer. “Any team’s apt to find itself in a hitting slump when Sparky’s anywhere near right. And he was right.”

The captain gave him a freezing glance. “I thought it was about time for you to have a rush of words.”

Darcow quieted the storm between captain and catcher as he had quieted many other storms. “It was nice work,” he said.

Marty walked on air. He couldn’t miss the chance for a final shot.

“Watch what he does tomorrow,” he challenged.

And on the morrow Sparky picked up the thread where he had laid it down the day before. Darcow, removing the batting-cage, sent men out to the fielding stations and batters hit from the plate. Only one boy hit safely and that was a hard hit ball that the shortstop knocked down but could not recover in time to make a throw to first. At the end of ten minutes the coach waved the pitcher from the mound.

“Get that arm into a sweater, Sparky,” he ordered. “Take things easily for the rest of the day.”

After the practice, with the team gone in to the showers, Marty, Darcow and the captain sat upon the bench.

“What do you think of the accident now?” Darcow asked.

Jimmy Blake looked at the coach with a new respect. “Is it a flash or is it really real?”

“It’s real,” said Marty.

Darcow nodded. “Think of Mott Haven facing that type of pitching tomorrow, Jimmy. It should bring pleasant dreams.”

“I’m thinking of the weather,” said Marty. “It looks as though it might rain.”

Saturday brought chill, a bleak dampness, a high wind and gray clouds scudding across a dull sky. Marty, who had gone to bed fearing that rain might halt Sparky at the moment he was ready, found the day joyously to his liking. Traveling with the Panthers he had absorbed some of the beliefs of baseball.

One of them was that a dark, overcast day was made to order for a fast ball pitcher. Well, this was Sparky's day. Cut right to his pattern.

He turned on his side, and stretched, and prepared to enjoy another lazy fifteen minutes of bed. Buck Olsen's photograph caught his eye. Other bits of gossip of the Panthers' dressing-room came unbidden and stole into his thoughts. His spirit was suddenly weighted with the lead of uneasiness. He tried to throw the disquietude off only to have it persist. Ghosts out of the past stood alongside his bed. Buck's voice, whispering hoarsely, told him of pitchers who had started the season wrong and thereafter had been unable to find themselves. Suppose Sparky had developed a mental hazard? They had had one man like that with the Panthers. Superb during a practice session, but haunted at the start of a game with memories of past defeats!

The allure of a lazy fifteen minutes was gone. Marty leaped from the bed and examined his chin minutely. There wasn't enough of a beard to make a shave anything but a waste of time. That was the worst of red hair, he thought in humiliation. The down blended with the skin and he had to shave only twice a month, while Jimmy Blake, black-haired, had to shave twice a week. The almost invisible red sprouts seemed like a sign of weakness.

Dressed, he went upstairs to Sparky's room. The door was open, and the pitcher was knotting a tie in front of a mirror.

"This is the day, Sparky, old boy."

Sparky glanced toward the window. "Think there's any chance of rain this afternoon?"

Uneasiness stirred anew in Marty. Had the pitcher asked the question hopefully or had he only imagined it? He snapped his fingers.

"I meant to pick up the radio weather report. Forgot. It's too late now. All set, Sparky?"

"Sure."

"For breakfast or for the game?"

"Both," said Sparky.

Marty chewed his lips and watched the pitcher pat the tie into place. Was it his imagination again, or was Sparky a little drawn, a little too finely wound? Probably it was his imagination. Nevertheless, apprehension nagged him. Would Sparky have to make his recovery fight all over again? Oh, why hadn't he kept his mouth shut and taken it for granted that Darcow knew his business?

At noon the wind still moaned through the campus oaks.

The dining-room had been rearranged. The team, as it always did on game day, ate at one long table. Marty warned: "Not too heavy with the knife and fork, Sparky." He took his own medicine and ate a frugal meal. Sparky ate even less. Marty kicked his legs under the table and wished he had said nothing until he saw what the pitcher was putting on his plate. That would

have given him a line. This way, he didn't know whether Sparky had come to table without appetite or had simply obeyed a suggestion.

When the team went to the locker-room the flag on the center-field flag-pole whipped and snapped. The day was leaden. Captain Jimmy Blake gave Marty a meaning glance and together they went down the locker-room toward Darcow's office.

"How do you feel about things now?" Jimmy demanded of the coach. "Changed your mind?"

"About what? Sparky?"

"Yes."

"Why should I?"

"If they hit that fast ball----"

"Roll over and wake up!" Marty cried. "A fast ball on a dark day? What have you done with your baseball brains? They'll be mighty lucky if they see the ball. This weather makes today's game right to order for Sparky's alley."

The captain ignored him. "When a fast ball is clouted right on the nose it travels."

"But first they have to clout it on the nose, Jimmy."

Jimmy continued to ignore the catcher. "With a breeze like this to help a ball along----"

"A fast ball on a dark day very often breezes past the batter," Marty interrupted.

"Of course," Jimmy said with disdain, "no batter ever connects with a fast one on a dark, overcast day. The pitcher comes out of the game with twenty-seven strikeouts."

Marty bristled. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"No; are you?"

"Listen! I'm telling you----"

"You're usually telling somebody," the captain snapped. "Why don't you tell Sparky?"

Marty's heart gave a throb. Had Darcow broken his own command for secrecy and said something to Jimmy? Evidently not, or Jimmy would have said much more. Very much more.

The catcher gave Darcow an appealing glance. The support he confidently expected did not materialize. Evidently the coach had been presented with a new thought.

"We'll start Sparky, anyway," he said, "and keep Joe Tuthill warmed up and ready."

"Warmed up for what?" Marty demanded.

"There may be something in what Jimmy says."

Marty's hands began to sweat.

Here was a condition he had not foreseen. Sparky, going into the game, might easily totter along for a while on the ragged edge. Even in the big leagues more runs, on an average, are scored during first innings before pitchers have the kinks shaken out of their arms and get going, than in any other inning of the game. And here was a come-back Sparky, not only fighting the usual first-inning hazards, but also probably fighting a mental hazard. If Sparky slipped, Darcow wouldn't give him a long enough chance to fight his way out. Sparky had to make good from the start.

"How much time are you giving him to show class, Coach?"

"I'll know if he's not showing class," Darcow answered.

A wagging tongue, the catcher reflected bitterly, sometimes brought a hard, merciless price when the bill was presented for payment.

While he put on his uniform he watched the pitcher. Nerves! He was sure now. If Sparky could get over that---

The warm-up was better than the promise that Sparky had shown before either of his other games. He had his speed, he had his curves--and yet there was something he should have had that was not there. As the minutes passed, Marty went through an agony of uncertainty, flashes of hope and stabs of sick despair. There were moments when Sparky threw him a ball that seemed to be unhittable, moments when the pitcher sent in a delivery that a batter could have killed. Marty could read the story as though it had been printed on paper. Nerves running a chaotic race and spasmodically undermining muscles and tissue. Mental hazard had shown itself long before the first batter had come to the plate.

The catcher brought the warm-up to a close. The umpires, blue-clad, appeared at the plate and the rival captains met them for a conference. Joe Tuthill and one of the second-string backstops disappeared. Marty knew where they had gone. It was wise baseball, of course, to have a pitcher ready, and yet today the action seemed to Marty to be cold and calculating. It were as though they kept a pitcher warm expecting to run him in to Sparky's rescue. How did they know Sparky would need rescue? The catcher sat down close to the coach, and held his shin-guards motionless in hands that should have been buckling them on, and stared down hard at the ground.

"How?" Darcow asked.

"He has almost everything a pitcher needs," Marty answered in a low voice.

"If what?" the coach asked.

Marty looked at him.

"I don't like the sound of that 'almost.' If what?"

"If he can forget," Marty answered in a scarcely audible voice.

"It's up to you," Darcow said significantly, "to make sure that he does

forget.”

Yes--it was up to him. He saw the elemental justice of that and was not resentful. He was the cause of the mental hazard; he had created it. Now he must beat it down, trample it flat and cause it to disappear. It had to be a quick job; it had to be done, perhaps, within the next fifteen minutes. Perhaps before the third inning of the game was reached.

With his shin-guards and chest protector buckled on, he walked out from the bench with his mitt and his mask under his left arm. His right hand was on the pitcher's shoulder. A band played in the Mott Haven section and the crowd sang in holiday mood.

“About like old times, eh, Sparky?”

“About,” said Sparky.

“Remember the games we won together?”

“Last season?”

A shock ran through Marty. The question spoke volumes. He ignored it and asked another.

“How's the boy feeling today?”

“Anxious,” Sparky said frankly.

Marty put on a great air of surprise. “About what?”

“Oh, what's the use of trying to kid me, Marty? I'm not getting cold feet, but I'm facing facts. In those other two games----”

Marty hooted derisively. “Those,” he said with an air of wisdom, “were the other two games. This game is this game. See? All the difference in the world. This time Arrowhead has a pitcher who's good and who knows he's good. Sparky, old boy, this game is nicely fitted into the bag. It isn't a tight fit. Feed them that fast ball and watch them get disgusted and throw away their bats.”

Sparky's grin was uncertain. “You almost make me believe it,” he tried to joke. The joke sounded heavy.

But at least, Marty thought, it was a stab at humor.

Crouched behind the plate, the catcher squatted lightly upon his heels. Sparky sent him a few preliminary pitches and he took one test throw to second and found that he had the range. If Sparky could hold them close to the bag he'd like to see any of them try to steal today. The umpire cried “Play ball!” He was conscious of the wind strumming past his ears, sweeping through the compact infield and rippling the short grass of the outfield. The wind would kill some of Sparky's speed; he'd have to hurl against the pressure. But the sky remained gray and drab, and the whole aspect of the day was lowering and gloomy. That would help.

The first Mott Haven boy stepped jauntily into the batter's box. “Hello, Marty,” he greeted. “What's Darcow's idea in sending out his No. 1 catcher to be a useless?”

Marty grinned. "Hello, Steve; haven't seen you since we set you down hitless last year. Why all this talk about useless?"

"You fellows don't need a catcher today, do you?" the batter asked with assumed surprise. "Doesn't Darcow want this game? Looks as though Sparky throws them up and gets them clouted back."

"Oh, well," Marty said lightly, "they think I add dignity to the game. I'm a real handsome guy when you study me in the right light."

His brain grappled with problems. Evidently Mott Haven confidently expected no trouble from the pitcher who had already been hammered unmercifully. That would make the game a little tougher. The fast ball? Perhaps it would be a mistake to call for it so soon. Better let Sparky get the feel of the ball and get a pitch or two out of his system. He called for a floater on the outside, above the knees.

The batter swung and missed. The force of his blow turned him all the way around.

"What's the matter?" Marty asked. "That was supposed to be crowned. Honest. Sparky tossed it in to have it clouted back. Don't you see how disappointed all the outfielders look? You boys aren't kidding around with us, are you?"

The pitch had come over nicely, and the Mott Haven man had missed it by four or five inches. What now? The fast ball? Marty pretended to have trouble with his mask and took it off and reset it. Better wait a little. Give Sparky time. He crouched and signalled for another floater above the knees, this time above the inside corner of the plate.

"Right at him, Sparky," the catcher yelled. "This boy has a good opinion of himself. Whittle him down."

Whatever the batter had or did not have, he had a good eye. He stepped back. The pitch narrowly missed the inside corner.

"Ball one!"

"Too bad, Steve," Marty commented. "We thought you'd like that. Let's try another."

Now? Marty took plenty of time about going down into his crouch. He had to call for the danger pitch sooner or later, and this was the logical spot. The batter, having been fed two low, slow balls, the second of which barely escaped being a called strike, might expect a third. His finger, placed against the mitt and hidden between his knees, telegraphed--high, fast and to the inside. And suddenly he was conscious of a hot, damp moisture on the palm of the hand encased by the cumbersome mitt.

The ball flashed plenty of speed, but had very little hop. A cripple if a man were set to meet it. The batter was not quite set. He swung, and the ball zipped over Marty's head and fouled into the wire netting behind the plate.

Chasing the rolling horsehide the catcher gave fervent thanks for the gloom that made a fast ball hard to hit. He threw the ball to Jimmy Blake at third and lumbered back to the plate.

“That’s two of them, Steve. Better be careful. Sparky has a way of getting real tough when he has two on the batter.”

Crouched again, his shrewd brain judged the boy at the plate. Something in the stance showed that the batter had relaxed a bit. Ah-ha! So that was it. Evidently with the count two strikes and one ball he expected Sparky to tempt him with a bad offering or two. One, at least. Marty’s eyes danced and his lips twitched. This was the place to try a little double-cross.

“Nice work, Sparky. It has him tied. He isn’t quite sure what’s happening to him.” A brown finger, laid against the darker brown of the glove, called for a fast ball below the shoulders.

The delivery caught the batter by surprise. He made a half-hearted attempt to bring the bat up and changed his mind. Standing there, helpless, undecided, he let the pitch go past.

“You’re out,” the umpire ruled.

The stands began to cheer. That, Marty thought, should be grand music to Sparky. It was the first time the stands had had a chance to cheer him since the season started. Straightening up out of his crouch, he gave the shrill victory yelp of Arrowhead and whaled the ball down to second. While the infield threw the ball around he went down the pitching fairway to talk to Sparky.

“Sparky, old boy,” he chortled, “give them a chance, will you? That’s not pitching; that’s target shooting.”

“I was worried,” Sparky confessed. “I didn’t know how I’d be on control. I was afraid of the corners.”

“Control?” Marty laughed. “That’s a joke to sell to the magazines. Forget control. Four pitched balls. You ranged the plate three times and missed it once by a squeak. What do you want to do, knock the eye out of a gnat? It’s going to be soft meat. You’re running in high without a knock.”

“We’ve had only their first batter,” Sparky said uncertainly. Plainly he longed to hope, and yet dared not let himself pin too great a faith on hope.

Marty scoffed. “Sure--their first batter. What do you want to do, take three of them in a group? You have to take them one at a time. Their lead-off man. The player they figure has the best chance to get on base. You stopped him dead.”

“How--how’s the hop?”

“Did you see that fellow smacking it?”

Sparky was staring intently at the plate. “That next fellow looks as though he might be a hitter.” Marty had to fight down a groan. Was Sparky going to totter on the brink of fear all through the game? Mental hazard! And if Sparky

slipped once--just one bad slip----

“A hitter? You’re developing an imagination, Sparky. He looks scared to death to me. We’ll slip a nice fast one across his letters and see how he likes it.”

The batter didn’t like it at all. Like the boy who had preceded him he made a motion as though to cut at the ball, thought better of it and checked the blow.

“Strike one!” the umpire said.

“What?” The batter swung around with an out-raged roar. “That ball missed the plate by a mile.”

“Strike,” the umpire said coldly.

“Why that ball missed the inside corner by a good foot.”

The umpire made a resigned gesture. “You said a mile a second ago and now you’re down to a foot. Play ball.”

Marty chirped blissfully. “Never let yourself get peeved, Mott Haven. Bad for the batting average.” Hot dog, they were beefing already. He was back in his crouch.

“Come on, Sparky. This boy’s arithmetic is awfully bad. Give him another one to figure out with a pencil.”

“Climb into it, Cal,” roared the coacher on first. “He hasn’t a thing but a fast ball.”

The signal for that, Marty decided, must have come from the Mott Haven bench. He wondered what effect this bugle call of warning would have upon Sparky Woods. In Sparky’s mental state anything might serve to throw him off.

So they were setting themselves for speed, were they? Watching out for the fast ball! His eyes snapped. Sparky’s floater wasn’t anything to grow hysterical about, but it had come over twice and had been effective. If the batter was set to murder speed, why give him the expected? He signed for a slow ball, and held his mitt below the batter’s shoulders as a target.

The ball came toward him high, lazy and without guile. Another dud! But the batter, following instructions, was geared for speed and swung too soon. The ball bounded down to Jimmy Blake and was whipped across the diamond for a put-out.

Marty’s hand, two fingers outstretched, was thrust high into the air where the whole team could see it. “Two down, gang. Two men put away. Everybody in there with the old fight.”

The third batter, who had been swinging two bats as he waited to come up to hit, was called back to the Mott Haven bench. The Arrowhead infield sent the ball spinning about the bases. Marty, watching them keenly, decided they were doing some snappy work. With Sparky mowing down the first two men without trouble, the infield looked better already. Heads up and playing ball!

From the infield the catcher's attention turned to the Mott Haven bench. The batter, intent, was still listening to instructions. A lot of instructions. Slowly a bland, cherubic grin spread itself across the catcher's face.

The batter, away from the advice of the bench at last, took position at the plate. Sparky fidgeted with his cap and could not seem to get it to set right.

Marty read it as a tell-tale sign. A bad sign. Sparky was worrying about what the Mott Haven boy might have been told by his coach, worrying about the significance of that cry of "He hasn't a thing but a fast ball." The catcher's hand was sweating again and had begun to itch tantalizingly. Darcow had told him he was the one to pull Sparky through. Well----

"Must have surprised your coach to find Sparky had a sweet change of pace," he said casually to the batter. "You'd be surprised to learn how many surprises we give visiting coaches."

The batter sniffed. "You don't tell me."

"Oh, but I do. I was never more serious in my life. This is a serious team. We're all serious. What did your coach tell you the first time? To go out and slug a fast ball?"

"You like to talk, don't you?" the batter grunted.

"Your coach likes to talk. Called you back and told you not to let yourself get set too solidly for a fast ball. Nice of your coach to be so thoughtful of you, but then he doesn't have to do the hitting. Sort of puts a batter up in the air, doesn't it?"

The batter glared.

"Don't get sore at me. I'm trying to be helpful to a brother in distress. Want me to tell you something?"

"Oh, hush up."

"Tush, tush! Didn't your coach ever warn you not to let a catcher get your nanny? You must be a stupid goat." Marty's voice became dreamy, confidential. "I'll tell you something. Sometimes Sparky throws a fast ball, and sometimes he throws a slow ball, and sometimes he whips one in that you don't see until your head clears. This one, now, is going to be a high, fast in. Get set for it."

The batter took it as propaganda to throw him off, and prepared to hit at a slow ball or a curve. The ball, coming in high and with plenty of speed, caught him off balance and went for a called strike. Strike one!

"What good did it do me to tell you?" Marty asked in hurt tones. "Didn't you believe me?"

The batter's fingers kept winding and unwinding nervously on the taped handle of the bat.

"Now look at that," Marty said accusingly. "I give you the correct dope and you scorn me. Is that justice? All right; use your own head. This may be a

slow ball or it may be a fast ball. I won't tell you. But--*here she comes!*"

The pitch was frightful.

Marty had called again for speed and there was no speed. Not real speed. The ball wobbled. It was a bad ball, far outside, and a cool-headed batter would have let it go past. But the Mott Haven boy was nettled and in no humor for cool judgment. He swung at a pitch he should not have gone after at all. The ball nicked off the end of his bat to the first-baseman for an unassisted put-out.

The Arrowhead stands arose and gave the pitcher an ovation as he left the mound. Jimmy Blake tossed his glove outside the third-base line and ran toward the bench. Boy, this was the old Sparky. He sat down and began to babble to the coach.

Despite the coolness of the day Marty's forehead was wet with perspiration and he dried the moisture on the sleeve of his jersey. Sparky's first inning had been first cousin to his warm-up--high peaks and low valleys. The pitcher was like a scared colt, still standing hitched but quivering and ready to bolt. And it wouldn't take very much, the catcher was sure, to bring on a bolt that would strew Arrowhead's hopes all over the field.

Marty sighed. His fault--all of it. He'd pulled and jockeyed the unsteady Sparky through this frame, but what about the innings to follow? Could he successfully hold the pace all through the game? You could pull tricks on the batters only for so long. They'd develop caution. They'd go deaf to his blandishments. After that he might as well save his breath and attend strictly to his knitting.

He missed no chances. If you had to feed a man hurrah, feed him hard. Unbuckling his catcher's equipment, he fervently called upon the squad to observe that not a ball had been hit out of the infield. There was a space on the bench a bit removed from the coach. He squeezed in between Loftus, the shortstop, and a substitute.

Sooner or later, he knew, Darcow would call upon him for an accounting. The coach, from the angle of the bench, could not be sure how the ball was coming up to the batters--you had to be behind the plate for that, where you could watch the ball every moment. No sound came from the warm-up pen behind the stand. Marty attached no importance to that. Tuthill wouldn't warm up while Arrowhead was at bat. There would be no sense in wasting a pitcher's arm during the time he could not possibly be used. Probably, after this first inning, there would be no warming up at all unless a runner got on and wedged open the first crack of danger. But Tuthill, until the last man was out, would always be there.

His own nerves were under a strain and the temper that went with his red hair boiled in his blood.

Darcow wasn't fair. If Sparky got in deep he should be given a chance to fight out. Perhaps Sparky would fight out. Nobody had ever questioned his courage. Anyway, if Darcow were told that Sparky was in there with everything, perhaps he would hold Tuthill off and let Sparky, in a hard spot, battle for his own salvation. Why tell Darcow anything else if he wasn't ready to give the pitcher a complete, unhindered chance? If the spot did get tough past the point of safety couldn't he, Marty Gage, signal the bench that it was time to give Sparky the hook?

The sombre eyes that stared out across the fresh green of the field grew cloudy and moody.

"Jimmy!" Darcow called.

The captain looked up.

"Coach at first."

Jimmy went out to the coaching box. Darcow caught Marty's eyes. One finger made a significant gesture.

The first Arrowhead hitter had gone out to the plate. The players were crowded forward upon the bench. Marty, in going down to Darcow, had to walk outside the line of bats. The coach made room for him and he sat down in the empty space.

"How was he that inning?" the coach asked.

Marty sighed and made a vague gesture with his hands. He couldn't play fast and loose with Darcow and fool him. Darcow trusted him for the truth. Once he had run a knife into Darcow's back without realizing how great the wrong; now he would be unable to plead a mitigating ignorance. If he ran another knife between Darcow's ribs he'd do it with his eyes wide open. If he threw the coach down----

No; he couldn't do that.

"Shaky," he said, huskily.

"How shaky?"

"Coach, it's touch and go whether he gets through."

He knew that now he'd have to hold Sparky up right to the end. There was no escape for him--or for Sparky.

CHAPTER VIII

Marty Makes a Promise

The first inning was over. Three Arrowhead men had gone to bat in order, and three Arrowhead men had gone out in order. Deep in center field, against the black background of a board, a boy fussed with square cards painted with white numerals. He stepped aside and the stands read:

VISITORS 0
ARROWHEAD 0

All through the last half of that inning Sparky had sat in silence upon the bench. Marty had only to look at his face to know the story. Darcow had only to look at the pitcher to know it, too.

Advertising himself, Marty thought glumly. A pitcher at ease would have let all his muscles go limp and have relaxed against the back-rest of the bench. But Sparky sat with his back unnaturally straight and tense. Trying to keep those trembling nerves in check and hold them under control. Two fights. One fight against himself; the other against a rival team. Two fights at once was almost a greater load than any pitcher could carry.

As the third Arrowhead batter was thrown out Marty rose from his place beside the coach.

“Hot stuff, Sparky,” he encouraged. “One after the other last inning, one after the other this inning. No pitcher can do better than set them down as they come.”

“Nice work,” Darcow beamed.

Sparky grinned an uncertain grin, and reached for his glove, and strode away toward the mound.

“Take plenty of time,” Darcow said to Marty. “Don’t rush him.”

Both teams had recovered from the usual first inning uncertainty and were in their stride. The Mott Haven bench had quieted; the Arrowhead infield threw the ball around with greater speed. A Mott Haven boy came to the plate and picked his position in the batter’s box. The bat moved in small, restless circles.

Marty spoke genially. “New man, aren’t you?”

No answer.

“You must be a new man. New men are usually afraid to talk to the catcher for fear something will be slipped over on them. It isn’t fair to send a new man out to bat against Sparky Woods. They ought to build him up, first, on weaker pitchers. Give him a chance to develop some confidence in himself.”

The batter paid no attention.

“Hope those fellows who came up in the first inning don’t feel sore. I’d hate to have even a Mott Haven man sore at me. It hurts way in here. They’re not sore at me, are they?”

The batter wagged the bat impatiently.

“Not very sociable, are you? Maybe they don’t teach you the social graces at Mott Haven. You know, this Sparky of ours is a wicked man when he’s right. He’s right today. Don’t you fellows think so?”

The batter might have been deaf. His eyes were glued upon the pitcher.

Marty grunted. Well, that was the end of blarney. No doubt the Mott Haven coach had given orders that they were to pay no attention to his conversation. The game had come down to baseball, ruggedly plain and unadorned. He laid one finger against the cup of the mitt as a signal for the fast one.

The batter caught it flush on the nose.

Marty’s heart flopped. He could tell by the crack that this hit was going to travel far. But Johnny Loftus, at short, made a monkey leap into the air and brought the ball down in his glove.

Marty’s heartbeat came back to normal. Six inches to either side of the shortstop and there would have been trouble for Arrowhead. Sparky was jerking aimlessly at his belt. Another bad sign. That slap had rocked him. Marty, looking like a stuffed man in his protector and shin-guards, lumbered out to the pitcher.

“I thought he caught hold of that one,” Sparky quavered.

“Where did you get that bright idea?” Marty asked genially. “They either don’t hit it at all or else they slap it right into the hands of a waiting fielder. That’s handcuffing them, Sparky.”

“The way he timed that pitch----”

“He didn’t time it, Sparky; he just happened to hit it.”

The pitcher worried his glove, pulling it off and pushing it back. “The way that one was smacked----”

The catcher chuckled mellowly. “I could see the side of his face. You couldn’t; you were too far away. Surprised? Listen. He was the most surprised man on the field.”

Marty couldn’t tell what impression he had made on Sparky. Perhaps he had made no impression at all. Now it was the back of his neck that itched and was hot and moist. Strain was beginning to tear at him. He realized the tremendous fight that Sparky was making to come through--Sparky who should never had been anything but a winning pitcher. And all because of big-league ideas and too much big-league wind behind a loose tongue.

However, he had to get on with the game. He went back to the plate to

where another batter waited. His finger, imperative, demanded the fast ball. He held his breath. What sort of fast ball would it be? If that whale of a drive had started Sparky down the slide----

The ball came from the pitcher with a zip. The batter took a vicious swing and missed.

Oh, Marty exulted, but Sparky was certainly out there making a fight of it. He spoke politely to the batter:

“Too bad. You didn’t come anywheres near it. Can’t you see it? Shall I ask him to throw one a little slower? No trouble to be accommodating. Maybe, if you wouldn’t grip your bat so hard you’d have better luck.”

This batter, as grimly silent as the first, dug in with his spikes. Marty chortled under his breath. What a sap to give himself away so completely. All set for speed!

“You know,” Marty murmured, “I like to be obliging, but there’s a limit. I’d be a sucker, wouldn’t I, to give you a fast ball when you’re all set to meet speed. Tush, tush!”

He called for the high in.

The seeds of mental conflict, of uncertainty, had been planted. The batter, unable to make up his mind until the last moment, lunged wildly at the pitch and lifted a lofty, twisting fly that fell into Sparky Woods’ hands.

Two down and nobody on! Another batter was at the plate, a left-hander.

Marty squinted. A high in to a right-handed batter would be a high out to a “lefty.” He paid studious attention to the Mott Haven boy’s hands. They gripped the bat far down at the handle. Lots of reach to get at the old high inshoot, but a bad position for anything that crowded him and came close. Well, if Sparky could put the ball where he was asked to put it---- Marty called for a low pitch across the batter’s inside corner.

Sparky shot the ball in low--low and inside. The batter clubbed the leather into the ground for the third out.

Marty gave no sign of the weariness that wrapped him as he came to the bench. Darcow made room for him again and he sat down. The expected cross-examination started.

“A little better that time, Marty?”

“More than a little better, Coach. A whole lot better. When that ball was driven at Loftus I thought he’d wobble but he came right back.”

“Control?”

“Good.”

“Where’s the weak spot?”

“Inside. He isn’t sure of himself. Wondering if he’s going to get through. Give him time.”

Time, Marty prayed. Time was everything. Time to give a tight pitcher a

chance to slowly loosen and unwind. Johnny Loftus picked up a bat and looked toward Darcow for instructions.

“It’s all yours,” the coach said. “Pick out a good one. Use your head.”

The shortstop didn’t have to use anything. The first pitch broke in too far and smacked against his ribs. He trotted down to first base rubbing his side.

Marty almost leaped from the bench. This was the first man on. This was their first chance to threaten. Oh, if they’d only give Sparky a run. One run! It would give the pitcher an edge to work on, and how he needed an edge.

But the next Arrowhead batter popped into the air trying to bunt, and Loftus had to make a wild slide to get back to the bag. The next man fanned. Rosy Scott, the second-baseman, swung a thick bat and looked at Darcow.

“Loftus going down?” he asked.

“They’ll expect him to steal,” Darcow said with icy coolness. “Take two. They’ll probably waste a couple.”

The coach had made a shrewd guess. The first two pitches were purposely wide of the plate.

A paper tumbled along the ground before the wind. Marty was out of his seat and on one knee before the bench.

“This one’s got to come over,” he kept muttering to himself.

The pitcher did put it over, and Scott drove a long double into left field. Loftus, who had begun to steal on the pitch, had a long lead and came all the way home.

There was riot in the Arrowhead stands. The cheer leaders called for a locomotive for Scott. Marty continued to half-kneel in front of the bench. Another hit would mean another run.

The hit did not materialize. The ball was hit sharply to the box and tossed over to first for the third out. The score read:

VISITORS	0	0
ARROWHEAD	0	1

Marty nodded toward the score-board. “Sparky, now we’re out in front and can stretch around. They’ve given us a lead.”

The pitcher nodded slowly. His lips were set in a grim line of determination.

Marty knew, all too well, what that meant. Saying to himself: “It’s up to me to hold it; up to me to hold it.” Tight as a spring, and a tight pitcher--because of his tightness--is never able to do his best. If Sparky could only feel a rush of power, if he’d loosen and relax. Then there’d be nothing to worry about.

Again he saw a Mott Haven batter dig in his spikes and wait for the high ball. The pitch he called for was low--low and fast--and the batter fouled it off.

Marty pounded his mitt. Sparky might be a trembling question mark, but he was certainly putting the ball across with uncanny control. And that, with a pitcher working on tortured nerves, was remarkable.

The catcher signalled for another low pitch. This time the umpire said "Ball--too low." The next delivery was also low, but came over for a called strike. Two and one!

Marty saw the batter shift for another low ball. At once he called for speed--high, and fast, and on the inside. The bat swung in a mighty arc and the ball thudded into his mitt for a strike-out.

Again he had outguessed a batter, but how long could he successfully keep up this game of wits? If Sparky had all his old, cool confidence they could ride along and bear down only when a run threatened to score. Now every ball was a crisis.

His chest protector had loosened; he stepped aside to adjust the straps. If Sparky wasn't a cool, nerveless machine who was to blame? Whose fault was it that every ball, had to be played as though it were the deciding pitch of a game? Whose fault was it that Sparky staggered and tottered instead of standing like a rock? Of course Darcow was right. His father and Buck Olsen had been right. Every batter, with the exception of the boy who had hit the liner to Loftus, was having trouble with a high, fast ball mixed up with low slow balls and low fast balls. But how much more helpless they would be if Sparky were really right?

Another Mott Haven batter. Another threat. Another boy who dug his spikes in firmly and got ready for dynamite. They were all coming up now with instructions to lay back for that fast ball.

This lad, Marty told himself in a dry humor, would have a long, discouraging wait.

He signalled Sparky for slow balls. Not much as slow balls go, but slow balls that crossed the batter up and left him at sea. Slow balls on the outside corner, slow balls on the inside corner and all of them a little above the knees. And finally a deliberate slow ball right below the shoulders in the fast-ball lane.

The batter exulted. This was the ball for which he had been instructed to wait. Expecting a smoker, he hit too soon and skimmed a grounder down the third-base line. Jimmy Blake scooped up the ball and threw across the diamond to first.

Two down in the third inning, and a Mott Haven batter had not yet been on the bases.

The Mott Haven pitcher came up to bat. Marty Gage grew conversational.

"How's tricks? Nothing wrong with your arm, I hope. We don't like to be mean to a pitcher with a sore arm."

“You do some worrying about your own pitcher’s arm,” the Mott Haven boy snapped.

Marty’s eyes gleamed. Ah! Somebody willing to pass words with him.

“Did your coach give you rats for letting Ryan double? You know, Ryan’s our worst hitter. So you can see what you’re in for.”

“Forget it,” the pitcher said. “I’m up here to hit. I’ll talk to you after I kill one and circle the bases.”

“Don’t keep me waiting that long,” Marty pleaded. “By the way, what would you like? High, low or around the waist? We aim to please.”

“Will you shut up?” the pitcher snarled. He turned to the umpire. “Can’t you keep this megaphone quiet?”

“Why, Ump,” Marty said innocently, “he was talking to me. Didn’t you hear him?”

“You’re delaying the game,” was all the umpire said.

Glints of mischief sparkled in Marty’s eyes. Oh, but this Mott Haven pitcher was nicely stewed up. Clad in a sweater against the damp chill the pitcher seemed awkward and ungainly. Besides, not one pitcher in twenty was able to hit. Marty nodded with satisfaction. This should be easy.

But the pitcher, timing a slow ball, lifted high and far into the distant outfield.

Marty’s breath stopped. A hard hit ball, with the wind behind it--And then he noticed, all at once, that the flag hung limply from the top of the center-field pole. Absorbed in the study of each batter he had failed to notice that the day was changing. His breath came back. He watched the left fielder race toward left-center, pause and make the catch.

He had whipped off his mask as the ball was hit. Now he picked it from the ground, banged it against his side and walked with a gay swagger toward the bench. Arrowhead was getting the breaks, and the team that got the breaks usually came out ahead. With the wind gone, Sparky’s fast ball would be a trifle faster. With the day dark and gloomy the extra touch of speed would be that much more effective. He began to whistle.

“Sun’s coming out in about another minute,” said a voice from the bench.

The whistling stopped and Marty’s head jerked upwards. A ray of brightness flickered through the leaden sky. The brightness grew. Even as he stared at the heavens the sun burst through and a small patch of blue appeared.

“You’re up, Marty,” said Darcow.

He had forgotten he was the lead-off man in this inning. His mind wasn’t on batting. He took a cut at the first ball thrown to him, and was out on a twisting, spiralling foul.

“Where was your eye?” Darcow demanded. “That was a mighty bad ball you went after.”

Marty sat down without making a reply. He had rejoiced at the thought of breaks for Arrowhead, but apparently Mott Haven was to be the lucky recipient of breaks. Brightness and a clear sky. A fast ball coming up against a sharp, brilliant background. A white target that could be followed clearly all the way from the pitcher's hand. What would happen now that the ball could be sighted so much easier? Drabness or brightness wouldn't mean a thing if the old Sparky was out there. The old Sparky had a fast ball that was a fast ball.

The catcher closed his eyes and leaned back wearily against the bench. His mind was bleak and wan. If he hadn't been so free with his tongue, so cocksure that he knew everything about pitching that was to be known---- His ears had gone deaf to sound, but a sudden, shrieking bedlam exploded him out of his reverie and aroused him. He snapped erect. Two runs were crossing the plate and Jimmy Blake stood grinning on second base.

Marty grabbed the score-keeper's arm. "How many are out?"

"Two," said the score-keeper, and stared incredulously.

"Where have you been while we were getting runners on? Sleeping?"

Marty shrugged. Two out and two runs in. A score of 3-0. The patch of blue had opened and spread and was now a sparkling blue vault. He leaned back again, but this time his eyes did not close. How long would a three-run lead last if--if----

Darcow's hand touched his knees; Darcow's voice, anxious, was in his ear.

"Anything wrong, Marty?"

"I don't know," Marty answered, "what will happen against that clear, sharp background. You'd better make sure Joe Tuthill's arm stays warm."

A moment later the reason for the coach's question dawned on him with a clutching significance. What sort of bone-head play was he pulling sitting around and looking like a funeral? That wouldn't do--there was Sparky to think about. He pounded his knees and began to talk.

"Yah! Another hit. Everybody climb on the wagon. Come on; another hit."

But another hit was not forthcoming. The score-board read:

VISITORS 0 0 0
ARROWHEAD 0 1 2

A Mott Haven boy, swinging the traditional two bats, waited for Arrowhead to take the field. Marty gave him a glance, squirmed into the chest protector, and sent another glance toward the plate. Suddenly his brain clicked and came out of a mental fog and his mind was filled raptly with illumination.

"Wait, Sparky," he called.

Sparky waited.

Marty straightened the left shoulder-strap and was conscious of Darcow watching him intently. He called to the coach in an undertone: "Watch this

inning; it may be good.” And then he hurried away from the bench and out to the waiting pitcher.

“Sparky, you old poisoner of Mott Haven infants, how are you feeling now?”

Sparky thought he felt a little better.

“You ought to. You ought to feel like throwing a bang-up party. Turn your head and take a squint at that Mott Haven boy coming up to try his luck.”

Sparky surveyed the batter.

“Recognize him?”

“N--no.”

“Look again.”

Sparky looked again and shook his head. “What about him?”

“Oh, come. Rub your eyes. Get a load of what’s in store for you. Take just one more look.”

Sparky said a trifle nettled, “What’s all this about, Marty?”

“So you don’t recognize him?” Marty chuckled mellowly. “You should. He’s the rainbow in your sky; he’s like unexpected money from home. Listen.” The catcher’s finger prodded the pitcher’s chest with each word as though to add emphasis. “That’s their lead-off man coming up for the second time. Now does that mean anything to you?”

Sparky frowned. “The lead-off man didn’t do anything dangerous the last time.”

“I’ll say he didn’t. Neither did anybody else. Don’t you see it, Sparky? Don’t you get the idea? You’ve waded through the whole batting-order from top to bottom. They’ve all had a shot at you. You’ve faced every man on the team.”

Sparky spoke in a startled whisper. “The whole team! That’s right. That fellow’s their lead-off man.”

“And what have they to show for it?” Marty demanded. “Make a search and see if you can find anything. Not a hit, not a runner left on the bases and only one ball driven out of the infield. You’ve put your mark on every one of them.”

With that he dug a thumb into the pitcher’s ribs and left him there.

Well, what would happen now. The trick was to say enough but not too much. Let Sparky figure the situation out for himself. Marty took his time about squatting into a catcher’s crouch. Somehow, he felt that he was milked dry; that this was the last dose of tonic he could mix. If this didn’t work---

Sparky was on the mound.

Marty watched. Small happenings registered. The pitcher’s arms hung loosely at his sides; he no longer fussed with cap or belt. His face seemed different, too. He stretched into a long, slow, luxurious wind-up. Marty had

given the signal. The catcher could almost feel the cramp flowing out of tight, strained muscles.

An arm flashed forward and the ball screamed toward the plate. It rifled solidly into the cup of the mitt with a crash that rose on the air in a sharp, clear echo.

The batter blinked.

“Yah!” Marty shrilled. He spoke solicitously to the batter. “Sorry. We didn’t mean to put on so much steam. Sometimes we forget we’re playing with little boys. Did you see the ball?”

Stark silence from the Mott Haven player.

“Don’t be discouraged,” Marty advised soothingly. “Your pals won’t do any better. Maybe you’ll be able to catch a glance of the next pitch.”

His knees trembled; he pounded the mitt. One pitch didn’t make a pitcher. If Sparky could shoot them through like that a few more times---- His finger gave a signal.

The next ball burned in with blazing speed. The batter topped the pitch. Sparky raced over to his left, scooped up the ball with a snap of his glove and threw the runner out.

“Yah!” Marty shrilled again. “How was that for a fielding play? Pepper in the pot.”

Contagion spread through the team. Jimmy Blake began to talk up the game with electric intensity. Around the infield voices barked hoarse responses. Marty Gage crooned something joyously serene deep down in his throat.

There was a delay before the next batter came to the plate. The stands began to stamp and yell.

Marty was once more deaf to sound. He watched the Mott Haven bench. Evidently there was another fervid conference going on. With eyes grown narrow and sharp he watched the boy who at length came toward the plate.

“What was all the oratory about over there?” he asked blandly. “Sparky’s speed?”

Again a Mott Haven boy said nothing.

“Why, he’s only begun to turn on the juice. You haven’t seen anything yet. Tell that to your coach when you go back to get his sympathy.”

The Mott Haven boy’s grip choked the bat. Marty chuckled. Some more frank advertising. Ready to cut quickly and sharply at a fast inshoot, eh? He took his time and kept the batter tensely waiting. When he did signal, he called for a fast ball on the outside. The pitch cut the corner.

The Mott Haven boy sent a helpless glance back toward his bench.

Marty’s hands were dry for the first time since the game had started. A song bubbled in his heart. He had wrecked a team and had saved it. There

wasn't a doubt in his mind. He had killed a pitcher and had brought him back to glowing life. He had salvaged his own happiness and self-respect.

And Sparky, all in a moment serene and confident, rose to rare heights of inspiration. The ball was a magic bubble, leaping and breaking, teasing and tormenting, blazing and smoking. The ball appeared to be a servant that obeyed his will.

A weak grounder to Johnny Loftus and there were two out. Then a puny fly popped to the first-baseman. Captain Jimmy Blake tossed his glove aside and came panting to the Arrowhead bench.

"Did you see it, Coach?"

"Every bit of it," Darcow admitted dreamily.

Out at the foul line Marty waited for Sparky.

"Hi!" said Marty.

"Hi!" said Sparky.

They fell into step.

"How is it now, Sparky?"

"Leave it to me," said Sparky Woods.

The clamor of the stands followed them.

The bench had a clamor of its own. An excited boy rattled the bats, and players and substitutes milled about Darcow. Victory was in the air. Somehow all of them, including the score-keeper who tried to protect his score-book from the jostling crowd, knew that a turning point had been reached.

Voices poured, and blended and churned about the coach's head reminding him of a hive of bees.

"I've seen pitching, but----"

"Pitching? That isn't pitching. It's sleight-of-hand."

"Where did he get it all of a sudden?"

"He threw one curve that dropped a foot. That was the ball grounded to Johnny."

"Control? Holy Mackerel! They don't get a chance to wait him out."

"What good would it do them to wait?"

The captain made himself heard above the uproar. "But what happened, Coach?" he cried breathlessly. "You had a hunch; you must have known something. In those other games he was a cripple. Now he's unhittable."

"I figured he was due," said Darcow.

"In this inning his high inshoot was a bullet. They were swinging blindly. What did it?"

The coach, eyes kindling, watched the padded form that lumbered in beside Sparky toward the bench.

"Perhaps Marty knows," he said.

Jimmy Blake turned swiftly toward the catcher. "Darcow says you know.

Do you?”

“Do I what?” Marty asked.

“Do you know what happened to Sparky to bring him back like this?”

Sparky stopped short.

“Yes,” Marty said after a momentary silence.

“What was it?”

There was another silence while the catcher shed his protector and shin-guards and dropped them beside the bench. “The wind went down,” he said at last.

Sparky gave the catcher a slight pat upon the arm. The captain was puzzled. He felt a tide of subtle currents that he could not fathom. Darcow’s face was inscrutable. But the catcher knew that the coach understood.

“I don’t think,” Darcow observed, apparently studying the sky, “that we’ll have any more trouble with wind.”

“Not in a million years,” Marty Gage, son of Silent Bill Gage of the Panthers, said fervently.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Obvious errors and inconsistencies in spelling and punctuation have been corrected. Inconsistencies in hyphenation have been retained.

[The end of *The Big Leaguer* by William Heyliger]