

FOLLOW
THE
BALL

BARBOUR

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APPLETON

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

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Title: Follow the Ball

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Ralph Henry Barbour (1870-1944)

Date first posted: Oct. 24, 2019

Date last updated: Oct. 24, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20191053

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FOLLOW THE BALL

By RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

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THE PLAY THAT WON
OVER TWO SEAS (With H. P. HOLT)
FOR THE GOOD OF THE TEAM
INFIELD RIVALS

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, Publishers, New York



THEN HAP FERRIS MADE A PASS TO SAWYER

FOLLOW THE BALL

BY

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

AUTHOR OF "INFIELD RIVALS," "FOR THE GOOD OF THE TEAM,"
"COXSWAIN OF THE EIGHT," ETC.



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NEW YORK :: 1924 :: LONDON

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	<u>FOR THE TEAM</u>	1
II.	<u>A SACRIFICE FOR KENTON</u>	14
III.	<u>FRIENDS AT OUTS</u>	23
IV.	<u>GHOSTS</u>	37
V.	<u>THE VIGILANTES</u>	48
VI.	<u>JOE FINDS A CLUE</u>	59
VII.	<u>THE LONE CHASE</u>	70
VIII.	<u>JOE RESIGNS</u>	80
IX.	<u>GUS BILLINGS NARRATES</u>	93
X.	<u>GUS BILLINGS CONCLUDES</u>	104
XI.	<u>CAMP RESTHERE</u>	116
XII.	<u>UNINVITED GUESTS</u>	127
XIII.	<u>DOWN THE BROOK</u>	139
XIV.	<u>ALONZO JONES SPEAKS</u>	149
XV.	<u>ALONZO GOES ON</u>	163
XVI.	<u>GINGER BURKE</u>	176
XVII.	<u>ONE ALL</u>	187
XVIII.	<u>THE DECIDING GAME</u>	199
XIX.	<u>GINGER SIGNS UP AGAIN</u>	212
XX.	<u>CALLED TO THE COLORS</u>	223
XXI.	<u>JOE FOLLOWS THE BALL</u>	237

FOLLOW THE BALL

CHAPTER I FOR THE TEAM

Joe Kenton, tilted back in his swivel chair, was thinking.

The school year was nearly over and there were many things that he had meant to do and hadn't done. There was that extra course in the spring term, there was that reading that was to have made next year easier, there was—well, several other things. Such as getting on better terms with his roommate. That, too, had got by him, in spite of all his good intentions. There was some excuse for abandoning the extra course and the reading; playing on the school nine hadn't left much time for additional work; but attaining the reputation of being the cleverest second baseman in the history of the school needn't have kept him from making up with Hal Norwin.

The silly part of it was that there was no apparent reason for the estrangement. They had entered Holman's together last fall, and, although they had never chummed much at home, it had seemed natural that they should room together. But it hadn't worked out well. They had managed to get along without a real quarrel, but that was the best that could be said. And now, although no word had been spoken of it, it was mutually understood that next year they should separate. There were moments when Joe regretted it. It did seem that

they should have hit it off better. Why hadn't they? He had nothing against Hal; or nothing much. He did think him a bit snobbish, inclined to make too much of the fact that his school friends were of the "smart crowd." And sometimes he acted "stuck-up" about his playing. Perhaps, though, he had a right to, for he was easily the best man on the team, not even excepting Captain Bob Stearns. As for his trying to get Wilder on second instead of Joe, why, he had a right to his judgment. Still, that rankled.

Perhaps, thought Joe, if he had made the effort when he had meant to, away last autumn, they might have got together, and life in 14 Routledge would have been fairly jolly. Fourteen was a dandy study. They had been lucky to get it. He wished he could be certain of having as good a one next fall; for, of course, he would get out and let Hal fill his place with a more congenial roommate. In case the trouble had been more his fault than Hal's, that would sort of make up. And speaking of Hal, where the dickens was he?

The clock on his dresser said twenty-two past eleven. At Holman's you were required to be in hall at ten unless you had secured leave, and even then eleven was the limit of absence. And here it was twenty-two minutes after! Well, Hal must have obtained permission, for he couldn't get in now without ringing, and he surely wouldn't be idiot enough to risk a row with faculty! And yet, he reflected as he began to undress, it wouldn't be unlike Hal to take a chance just at the wrong time. He was forever doing it—and forever getting by with it! The crowd he trained with thought it clever to show contempt for rules and had, as Joe well knew, a long list of unpublished escapades to their credit; or discredit. Oh, well, he should worry! What happened to Hal was none of

his business. He had plenty of troubles of his own; one of which was to get the light out before “Granny” Maynard, second floor proctor, began his nightly snooping expedition. However, there were still full three minutes—

There was a sound at the open window. A hand slid over the sill and then the upper part of a body appeared against the outer darkness. “Give me a hand, Joe! That’s some climb. Thanks.” Hal Norwin swung over the ledge, breathing hard but grinning in triumph. Then the grin changed to a frown. “Rotten luck,” he continued. “I thought maybe they’d forget to lock the door for once, but of course they didn’t. And ‘Granny’ stuck his silly old bean out and saw me. I beat it around back, but I’ll bet he recognized me. Got the door locked?”

Joe nodded. “Yes, but we’ll have to let him in if he comes. Funny he hasn’t been around if he saw you.”

“Well,” panted Hal, “if he stays away another ten seconds I’ll beat him.” He struggled out of his clothes rapidly. “But if he did recognize me and reports me—well, you know the answer; probation for yours truly! And pro doesn’t suit me just now; not with the Munson game the day after to-morrow. There, now let him come! I—*listen!*”

There were footsteps in the corridor. Joe leaped toward the switch. In the sudden darkness he heard Hal’s bed creak. The footfalls came nearer. Joe, standing silent in the darkness, listened and hoped. Perhaps Maynard was only making his rounds, after all. Perhaps he hadn’t seen— The steps stopped outside. There was a moment of suspense. Then three brisk raps sounded.

“Pretend you’re asleep!” whispered Hal.

But Joe, remembering that he was still attired in his underclothes and that he had but the moment before put the light out, saw the uselessness of that. Instead, he fumbled his way to the door and opened it. The proctor stood revealed in the dim light of the corridor.

“Norwin,” he began.

“I’m Kenton,” said Joe placidly. “What’s up?”

“Turn your light on, please.” Maynard pushed past Joe into the room. The radiance showed the apparently sleeping form of Hal, a litter of hurriedly discarded garments about his bed and Joe but partly undressed. Maynard viewed the motionless form beneath the covers perplexedly. Then:

“Which of you came in by the window just now?” he demanded.

“By the window!” echoed Joe incredulously. “What is it, a joke?”

“Now stop, Kenton!” Maynard raised a hand. He was tall and thin and bespectacled, and had a way of holding his head slightly forward from his shoulders as he talked, perhaps because the glasses did not quite overcome his nearsightedness. “Don’t trouble to lie. I know what I’m talking about, for I watched from the lavatory window and saw one of you climb in there. And I’m pretty certain which one it was.” He turned toward the form huddled under the covers. “I’m sorry,” he went on, “but I’ll have to report you. I can’t understand your doing a crazy thing like this, though.” His tone was indignant. “You must have known what it meant to be caught. If you didn’t care on your own

account you ought to have realized what it would mean to the team, to the school. Hang it, it isn't fair to risk defeat just for the sake of some piffling escapade in the village!"

The form under the bed-clothes stirred, an arm was thrust forth and Hal groaned sleepily. Then, as though disturbed by the sound or the light, he thrust the clothes down and blinked protestingly. It was a good piece of acting. Joe wondered whether Maynard was deceived by it. It was hard to tell.

"Put out that light, Joe," muttered Hal. Then, wakefully: "Hello, what's the row?"

Maynard viewed him doubtfully. "I think you heard what I said," he observed.

"He says he saw some one climb in our window a while ago." Joe nodded smilingly at the proctor.

Hal turned and looked at the window, blinking and rubbing his eyes. Then: "Wh-what for?" he asked stupidly.

"I don't think he said," replied Joe gravely. "You didn't say, did you, Maynard?"

"I've had my say." The proctor turned toward the door. "I'm sorry, fellows."

"Just a minute!" said Joe. "Do you still think you saw—what you said, Maynard?"

"Naturally."

"And you feel that it's—it's up to you to spoil Saturday's game?"

"It's up to me to report to faculty. You should have thought of the game before."

“It seems sort of tough,” muttered Joe. Maynard flashed a puzzled look at him. Hal sat up impulsively.

“Oh, well,” he began, “I suppose—”

“Never mind,” interrupted Joe, shrugging. “I can stand it, I guess.”

“You mean—it was you?” demanded Maynard, staring hard.

Joe shrugged again. “I thought you said you knew,” he scoffed.

“I think I do,” replied Maynard meaningly, with a quick side glance at Hal’s troubled face. “But I can’t prove I’m right, I suppose. Seems to me it would be the decent thing for one of you to own up, though.”

Again Hal started to speak and again Joe interrupted. “Oh, piffle, Maynard! A fellow’s innocent until he’s proved guilty. Anyway, I guess the—the circumstantial evidence is all you need.”

“All right, have it your way, Kenton. You know where the evidence points. I’m sorry to have—I’m sorry it happened. Good night.”

“I’m sorry, too,” answered Joe soberly. “Good night, Maynard.”

The door closed behind the proctor and Joe snapped off the light. After a long moment of silence: “What did you do that for?” demanded Hal, truculently.

“Well, he was sure it was one of us. If I don’t play Saturday it won’t much matter. If you don’t, it’ll matter a lot.

You're the only one of us who can hit Cross, and unless some one hits him we're going to get licked. Besides, I didn't lie to him."

When Joe had struggled into his pajamas and crawled into bed Hal spoke again. "Mighty decent of you," he said. "Don't know that I'd have done it for you."

"Wouldn't expect you to. I didn't do it for you, so that needn't worry you. I did it for the team; or the school; or maybe just because I want to see Munson beaten."

"Oh," replied Hal in relieved tones. "That's different!" A minute later he added: "Sorry you're in a mess, though."

"That doesn't matter. G'night!"

Doctor Whitlock seemed the next day much more grieved than Joe. Of course, the doctor explained gently, it meant probation for the balance of the term, and probation meant that he wouldn't be allowed to take part in athletics, but in view of the fact that Kenton had maintained good standing for the school year and was well up near the head of his class there would be no further—ah—penalties inflicted. Joe thanked him gravely. Outside again, he laughed mirthlessly. Just what other penalty, he wondered, did the principal think mattered now?

He and Hal had not mentioned last evening's incident again. For that matter, there had not been many opportunities, for they had seen each other but a few minutes before breakfast. While dressing Hal had seemed morose and out of sorts. After the interview in the office Joe returned to Number 14. He might have gone over to the field and watched practice, and would have done so if he hadn't

funked the explanations that would have been required of him. There was a bad ten minutes just at dusk when Bob Stearns came in. The captain was hurt rather than angry and said one or two things that made Joe want to crawl under a bed—or weep. But he went away finally, leaving Joe feeling very small and mean, and liking Bob more than ever for the things he might have said and hadn't. Then there was another knock and Joe's silence didn't protect him, for "Granny" Maynard opened the door and descried the lone occupant of the study in the twilight.

"Mind if I come in a minute, Kenton?" he asked. "You know the fact is I feel particularly rotten about what's happened and I do wish it had been some one else besides me. How bad did they treat you?"

"Not very, thanks. Pro, of course. You needn't feel badly, though. You only did what you had to."

"I know, but—being proctor is fairly rotten sometimes. If it wasn't for the difference it makes in my term bill I'd quit it. But I really can't afford to. I suppose you're out of the game to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes. But my being out of it won't matter much."

"Not so much as Norwin," said Maynard significantly.

"Norwin? Oh, no! Hal's the best player we've got. Don't you think so?"

"I'm not much of an authority, but I've heard it said that he is." There was a moment of silence. "It's none of my business, Kenton, but I must say I think it was very decent of you."

“Thanks,” replied the other dryly. “What?”

“I guess you know what I mean. I’d rather not put it in words because—well, I’m not supposed to know anything about it.” Maynard laughed as he arose. “As I said before, Kenton, I’m beastly sorry.” He held out his hand and Joe, a trifle surprised, took it. “Hope we win to-morrow, eh?”

“Rather!” agreed Joe. After Maynard had gone he frowned into the darkness beyond the open window. “He knows. Or he thinks he knows. Well, it doesn’t matter. Nothing does—much. I wonder if I told Hal the truth last night, though. Did I do it for the school or didn’t I? Of course I want Holman’s to win, but—I don’t know! But I’d hate to have him suspect that—that—oh, shucks, that’s tommyrot! Why *should* I do it on his account? Of course I didn’t! Surly brute!”

Hal came in a few minutes later. He didn’t see Joe until he had turned the light on. Then: “Hello!” he said awkwardly.

“Hello. How did practice go?”

“All right, I guess. Wilder played second.”

Joe nodded. “I supposed he would. That ought to please you.”

“Me? Why?”

“You wanted him there, didn’t you?”

“Sure! With you out of it—”

“I mean before. Last month.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, rot! You tried your best to get Wilder on second in place of me, didn’t you?”

“Who told you that?” demanded Hal sternly.

“Why, I don’t know that any one exactly *told* me. Anyhow, it didn’t matter much. He’s got the place finally.”

“So you’ve been holding that in for me?” sneered Hal. “Let me tell you, then, that I did not try to get Wilder on second. I didn’t even want him there. Why would I? You’re the better player.”

“Oh!” murmured Joe, somewhat blankly.

“Yes, ‘oh!’” retorted the other. “I don’t say I wouldn’t have tried for Wilder if I’d wanted him. But I just didn’t. Now chew that over.”

“All right. But I thought—”

“You’re always thinking something that isn’t so,” grumbled Hal. “I’ll bet you’re doing it right now, too!”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re thinking that I—that I let you take the blame for last night because I want to play to-morrow,” flared Hall. “I do, but, if that was all I wouldn’t have let you. I’m standing for it because I know plaguesy well that if I don’t play we’ll get beaten. Oh, I dare say that sounds cocky, but it’s so. I can hit Cross’s curves and not another one of you fellows can come anywhere near ’em.”

“I know, and I’m not kicking, am I? I said it was me because I knew we’d get ‘Finis’ written all over us if you

were out of the game. So what's the use of chewing the rag about it now?"

"Because I won't have you think I'm a—a sneak and a coward! And you do think so—inside."

"I don't!"

Hal had come close and now he stood staring down at Joe menacingly. "You don't?" he demanded suspiciously.

"No, I don't."

"All right. *See* that you don't. If I thought you were lying I'd—I'd knock your head off! Mind you, I appreciate what you've done for me—"

"*You!*" shouted Joe, jumping up. "For *you*? Don't you dare say I did it for you! I did it because I wanted to." He waved a finger under the other's nose. "Just one more crack like that and I'll punch your ugly face in!"

"I didn't mean me personally," growled Hal. "Anyhow, we understand each other, I guess."

CHAPTER II

A SACRIFICE FOR KENTON

Holman's School had won the first contest with Munson, and she wanted very much to win the second and do away with the necessity of playing a third on neutral territory. This warm, blue-and-gold June afternoon found them well matched and eager, how well matched is shown by the fact that until the sixth inning neither side scored. Then Prentiss got Holman's first hit, a rather scratchy affair at that, and although Cummins was thrown out at first Prentiss reached second. Cross, Munson's really remarkable twirler, let down long enough to pass Wilder and, with one down, Holman's cheered hopefully. "Babe" Linder flied out to shortstop, however, and it remained for Cochran, Holman's left-hand pitcher, to do the trick, or, rather, to bring it about. Cochran was no batsman, and he knew it, just as every one else did, but he had a wonderful faculty for getting in the way of the ball. I'm not prepared to say that it was intentional, but Cochran's average was just about one base per game owing to being struck by a pitched ball. This time he got it on the thigh, started right off for first and, it may be, decided the matter for an umpire who was inclined for an instant to be doubtful. That filled the bases and there was a good deal of noise from coaches and spectators, and Cross, disgruntled, sought revenge by trying to catch Stearns off second, or by pretending to. At all events the ball went over the shortstop's head, Prentiss scored and Stearns raced for

third but was caught when the center fielder pegged a swift one to the third sack.

But Munson evened things up in the eighth, just when the home team had visions of a one-to-nothing victory, by getting two clean hits off Cochran and combining them with a clever steal. And at 1—1 the game dragged—no, it never dragged for an instant. But at 1—1 it stayed until the last of the eleventh. Holman's had no hope of doing anything in that particular inning, for the tail end of her batting list was up: Wilder, Linder, Cochran. But you never can tell when the break will come. Wilder was passed, Babe Linder laid down a sacrifice bunt and Cochran, in spite of almost Herculean efforts, took the fourth ball pitched squarely on his shoulder! Cross complained bitterly when the rival pitcher was waved to first, and I think the incident affected his delivery. At all events, Torrey, left fielder and head of the batting list, rolled one toward third and after baseman and pitcher had each politely left it to the other during a tragic moment the latter threw late to first. With bases filled, but one out and Hal Norwin swinging his two bats as he stepped to the plate, there could have been but one outcome. Cross had to pitch 'em and he knew it. Perhaps Cross already read the writing on the wall, for Hal said afterwards that that third delivery came to him with nothing on it but a sunbeam. He said that it looked so good he was almost afraid of it. Possibly Cross intended he should be. But Hal didn't scare quite so easily as that, and so he took a fine healthy swing at it and it traveled. It went straight and far and came safe to earth yards out of reach of right fielder and to Cummins went the honor of scoring the winning tally!

Joe didn't march back to the campus with the triumphant horde but cut across back of the gymnasium and made his way to Number 14 in a somewhat depressed frame of mind. He had watched the game from start to finish and was well satisfied at the outcome, but he hadn't been happy. When you have worked hard from February on to win your position and have set your heart on playing in the Big Game, why, you just can't help feeling a bit glum when the Big Game finds you perched among the noncombatants of the grandstand. I don't think Joe really regretted what he had done. One can be sad without being sorry. But there were moments when he was rather self-contemptuous, when he told himself that he had done a silly, quixotic thing for which no one thanked him.

They were still cheering and singing over in front of School Hall when he reached his room, and the sounds came to him around the corner of the building and floated in at the open window. Although it was nearly five o'clock the golden sunlight still streamed across the meadows beyond the little river and save for the disturbing and discordant sounds from the campus the world was dreamily silent. It was beautiful, too, with the fresh, new green of grass and leaves and the peaceful sky and the mellow sunlight, but he was glad that in a few more days he would see the last of it for a while. In fact, he wasn't sure that he ever wanted to return to Holman's. He felt so horribly like a failure.

The shadows lengthened and the sunlight became tinged with flame. The dormitory echoed to laughter and the tramp of feet and the slamming of doors. Then, presently, his own door opened and Hal came in, bustlingly, radiating triumph

and high spirits. “Some game, Joe!” he cried. “By jiminy, though, I thought they had us for a while! Didn’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Joe listlessly. “Cross was in great form.”

“Wasn’t he? I couldn’t get near him—until the last inning. Well, we won, thank goodness!”

Joe made no answer and Hal busied himself at the washstand. After a while: “You’re coming to the dinner, aren’t you?” asked the latter.

Joe hesitated. He had forgotten that the team would dine in state to-night in the visitors’ hall, with speeches and songs and at the end of the modest banquet, the election of a new captain. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I suppose I have a right to, but—”

“Of course you have. Any fellow who has played on the team during the season has. I asked because—” Hal hesitated, and Joe, looking across, saw him as near embarrassment as he ever got. “The fact is,” he began again, and again stopped.

“Don’t worry,” said Joe. “I intend to, anyway.”

“Intend to what?” asked Hal, looking puzzledly over the towel with which he was drying his face.

“Vote for you for captain.”

“Oh, that! Thanks, but you needn’t if you’d rather not. I sha’n’t mind if you don’t. That isn’t what I was going to say, though.” He tossed the towel aside and, hands in pockets, came over to the window. “Look here, Joe. I haven’t been feeling any too easy yesterday and to-day. I thought it was all right to let you take the blame for—for my foolishness

because it might mean winning the game to-day. And I guess it did mean that, as it's turned out. But I've sort of hated myself, just the same, and I guess what I ought to have done was stand the racket myself and let the game look after *itself*. But I didn't and post mortems don't get you anything. But there's no reason for carrying the thing any further. What we've got to do now is get you squared up with faculty and the school and—and every one. So I'm going to tell 'em the truth at dinner to-night."

"That's a brilliant idea!" scoffed Joe.

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because there'll be at least two faculty there, and if you think they'll let you accept the captaincy after 'fessing up to that stunt you're all wrong."

"I don't. They'll have me in probation to-morrow, of course. That isn't the question."

"Of course it's the question," said Joe impatiently. "You're practically sure of the captaincy. I know it and so do you. If faculty gets this on you you're a goner. Besides, what good's it going to do any one? School's over in three days, and just as long as they're going to let me pass with my class I don't mind three days in bounds."

"That's all right," replied Hal stubbornly, "but right is right. I let you suffer because I wanted to win the game. The game's won. Now it's my turn to stand the gaff."

"And lose the captaincy!"

Hal shrugged. "I know. I thought of that, though. It can't be helped. Besides—"

“It *can* be helped!” said Joe angrily. “All you need to do is get this fool idea out of your head. You talk like a—a sick fish!”

“Just the same—”

“No, sir! I won’t stand for it! What sort of a silly fool do you think I’d feel like with you getting up before all that bunch and—and spouting all that rot? If you tell that yarn I’ll deny it!”

Hal smiled. “I can prove it, though. I can produce five fellows who will testify that I was in Gus Billing’s room at eleven o’clock that night.”

“Is *that* where you were?” asked Joe eagerly.

“Yes.”

“Oh! Why, that isn’t—there’s no harm—”

“Of course there’s no harm, but I stayed too late. Gus’s clock was about an hour slow and I never thought to look at my watch. Anyhow, it won’t do you any good to deny it, Joe.”

“Well, then—” Joe spoke slowly, frowning intently across the shadowy room. “Maybe you sort of feel that you—you owe me something. Of course I didn’t do it just for—just to oblige you, but you wanted to win, and I guess I helped—”

“Of course I owe you something. I’m trying to make you understand it. And I’m going to pay what I owe.”

“Not that way,” replied Joe firmly. “If you do want to—to square things there’s just one way you can do it.”

“How’s that?” asked Hal suspiciously.

“Forget it!”

“No, sir!”

“Yes, I mean it, Hal.” Their eyes challenged. After a moment Hal shrugged.

“All right,” he said, “but I don’t get your idea. It isn’t as if you’d done it for me—” He stopped and there was a long moment of silence. Then he asked brusquely: “You didn’t, did you?”

“No!” answered the other. Hal walked over, picked up his jacket and began to put it on. “And what if I did?” added Joe defiantly.

Hal stopped with one sleeve on. “I knew mighty well you did,” he growled.

“You know a lot, don’t you?” grumbled Joe sarcastically.

“I know that if you don’t wash up and get ready we’ll be late,” laughed Hal. “Get a move on, Grumpy!”

“Well—but no speeches, Hal!”

“Nary a spooch!”

Joe splashed and gurgled and Hal watched, grinning broadly. Presently he observed carelessly: “I say, Joe, we’ve only got two more days to get our application in if we want this room next year.”

Joe dried his face with unusual care. “That’s right,” he said at last. “Guess we’d better get busy, eh?”

Maynard fell in with Naylor, assistant manager, on his way out. Naylor was still figuring his totals in the official score book and Maynard peered over his shoulder.

“What did you give Kenton on that last play?” he asked.

“Kenton? Kenton wasn’t in it, you idiot! Wilder played—”

“Still,” said “Granny” soberly, “I think you should have credited him with a sacrifice.”

And he went on, leaving Naylor looking after him commiseratingly.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDS AT OUTS

Hal won the captaincy, and two days later he and Joe and Bert Madden started for home. About three hundred other youths also started for home, but none of them lived in Central City, and so, beyond the Junction, Joe and Hal and Bert went on westward alone. Bert was well over seventeen and would be a senior next year, as would Hal, a year younger. Joe, who was Hal's age within a few months, was returning to Holman's in the fall as a junior. He and Hal had been friendly at high school, and when Hal had decided to go to Holman's for the last two years Joe had decided to go also. It wasn't so easy for Joe, however, for Joe's folks weren't wealthy by any means, while Hal's were. But he had found employment last summer and worked hard, and, when September had arrived, his earnings, with what his father had been able to provide, had been sufficient to put him through the first year.

It wasn't going to be nearly so hard next fall, for Mr. Kenton's business had improved. Nevertheless, Joe meant to find some sort of employment for the summer months, and on the journey home this matter occupied his thoughts a good deal of the way. He couldn't go back to Murray and Bankhead's, for his place there was occupied permanently by another, but he was certain that he could find a job of some sort. While Joe considered ways and means, Hal was telling Bert about the good time he was going to have at his father's

camp up north and Bert was picturing the delights of summer life at one of the nearby summer resorts. Hal had invited Joe to visit the camp some time toward the last of the summer and Joe had half accepted the invitation. He didn't really expect to get there though.

Hal left town about a week after their return home, and Joe missed him a good deal at first, even though they didn't get together very often in Central City. Hal moved in a different circle than Joe. Looking for work, however, occupied much of Joe's time during that week and the next, for he had been home more than a fortnight before he secured the job with Donaldson and Burns, who operated the Central City Market. His principal duty was to deliver by bicycle, orders that could not await the trucks or that had been forgotten by them. When not occupied in that way he sometimes helped to put up orders. His hours were from eight to five, save on Saturdays, when the store kept open until nine. Thursday afternoons he had off, for in Central City Thursday was the weekly half holiday from July to September.

It was on the first Thursday afternoon after starting to work that he sat on an empty soap box by the window of the stable loft and listlessly distributed type from a "stick" in his left hand to the case before him. The July day was hot, and from the printing press that stood on a stout packing case came a strong though not unpleasant odor of fresh ink. Joe wasn't very happy this afternoon. On a shelf under the type case lay the results of his recent labor, twelve printed invitations still sticky from the press. Now, having distributed the last of the type, he lifted one of the invitations, held it at arm's length and read it. Beginning in

script, it ran the gamut of Old English, italics and small Roman, and it read as follows:

You are Cordially Invited
to Attend a House Warming at
Camp Peejay, Squirrel Lake,
Thursday, July 6.
Philip Levering Joe Kenton
R. S. V. P.

It really looked awfully well, but he couldn't get much of a thrill from that fact since, as sightly as they were, those invitations would probably never be used.

Until yesterday all had gone well. After work, with Philip reading the copy, Joe had finished the typesetting, and then, triumphantly, they had pulled a smudgy proof and viewed it with pride and elation. Just why at such a joyous moment the subject of painting the camp should have crept into the conversation is beyond knowledge, but it did, and half an hour later the two friends had parted in enmity, Philip flinging back as he clanged the front gate behind him: "Then I guess there won't be any housewarming!" and Joe replying haughtily: "Suits me all right!"

They had started the camp in April during Joe's week of vacation, dragging the timbers and boards from Loomis's mill behind Mr. Levering's Ford. By the end of the week it was complete even to the two windows, and they had stood off and viewed their work with pleasurable emotion. Everything about it was delectable: the tar-papered roof that smelled so gloriously in the spring sunshine, the little four-foot, uncovered porch that ran the ten-foot length of the

front, the door that wouldn't quite close unless you put your full weight against it, the little square windows—everything!

“Gee,” Philip had exclaimed, “it will look perfectly corking when we get it painted!”

And Joe had agreed heartily. What color it was to be painted hadn't been discussed then. The painting of it was to await Joe's home coming in June. It nearly broke their hearts that they couldn't enjoy their handiwork, but Joe was returning to school the next day, and so they finally clicked the padlock on the door and, not without many backward looks, left the cabin behind.

Philip had guarded it as well as he could during the ensuing two months, but Joe had received one heartbroken letter from him in May in which he told of going out to Squirrel Lake and finding the cabin broken into and both window panes smashed.

“It was ‘Bull’ Jones and Harper Merrill and that crowd that did it,” Philip had stated, “but you can't prove anything on them.”

Philip had repaired damages and when Joe got back the last of June the cabin had not been again molested.

Since then the two boys had found time to furnish the camp. They had put in an old stove from the Kenton attic, a table and two chairs and a camp cot—some day they meant to have another cot—and cooking things and tin plates and so on until the furnishings threatened to exclude the occupants. The housewarming idea had been Joe's. It would, he explained, be dandy to issue invitations and have, say, about ten of the fellows out there for supper. They could go

out in the Fullerton bus and walk back by moonlight. Joe wasn't certain about the moonlight, but he hoped for the best. Philip accepted the idea with enthusiasm, making but one reservation: none of Bull Jones's crowd should be asked! To this Joe agreed unhesitatingly, even passionately, and that evening they had arranged a menu for the supper, counted their cash on hand and composed the invitations. The next day Joe had brushed the dust from the printing press in the stable loft and, with Philip aiding, set type, worked the lever of the neglected press and pulled a proof.

Joe laid the invitations back now with a frown. He wondered why he had gone to the trouble of printing them, since they would never be used. Even if he and Philip made up again later, those cards wouldn't be any good, for there was the date set forth plainly: "Thursday, July 6." And that was only a week from to-day, and Joe was very, very sure that he couldn't be persuaded to forgive Philip in any such brief space of time as a week!

He turned moodily away and looked out of the window. On the Merrill's back porch Harper and Pete Brooks were doing something with a board and some wire. Harper kept rabbits and perhaps the contrivance had something to do with them. Joe wasn't interested, anyway. If he had been he could easily have gained enlightenment for the porch was only fifty feet away and the back of the house acted like a sounding board and threw the voices of the two boys right in at the window. But Joe was busy with his thoughts.

After all, he supposed it didn't matter much whether Camp Peejay was painted red or green. Only, having held out for green, he wasn't going to give in now, especially as Philip

had acted so pig-headed and selfish. Viewing the question calmly, he wasn't sure that Philip's argument was not quite tenable. Philip had said that if they painted the camp green it wouldn't show up well amongst the trees, and that, besides, red was a better color for winter, looking warmer and more cozy. Even before they had parted in anger, Joe had felt himself inclining toward red, but by that time too many things had been said! Gee, it was a mighty unimportant thing to quarrel about! Even in the matter of finding a name for the camp there had been no clash of opinion, although Joe had been secretly of the notion that, since the idea had originated with him, Jaypee would have been more proper, if less euphonious, than Peejay. Well, anyway, what was done was done, and if Philip expected that he, Joe, was going to back down and lick his boots he was mightily mistaken! No, sir, by jiminy! Philip could—could—

His indignant musings were disturbed. A new voice, loud and compelling, came in at the window. On the Merrill back porch Bull Jones had added his bulky presence to the group. Joe looked down and scowled. Bull was a bully and a braggart, the ringleader of the other crowd, the evil genius who had so nearly put an end to Camp Peejay, and Joe detested him so thoroughly that the mere sight of him was enough to re-rumple Joe's brow. But the scowl of dislike gave way to one of incredulity. Bull was outlining in perfectly audible tones a scheme never intended for Joe's ears! It was plain that none of the three on the porch knew that he was at the window. Perhaps the sunlight's glare masked him, or perhaps they had not thought to look. That as may have been, Joe acted promptly. He slid swiftly from the box, extended himself full length on the floor, well out of

sight, and listened avidly. Fifteen minutes later, the group on the porch having departed, he arose, abstractedly dusted his clothes and seated himself again on the box giving himself over to deep thought. The shaft of sunlight moved backward the space of one dusty floor board before Joe arrived at a course of action. Then, guiltily conscious of wasted moments, he seized his cap from the floor and raced down the stairs and out into the yard. The shortest way to Crown Street was via the side fence and the Martin's rhubarb patch. This route was attended by some risk, for Mrs. Martin's ideas on the subject of trespass were extremely narrow, but the present occasion seemed to Joe to warrant risk, and he took it. Reaching the top of the board fence by means of the grape trellis, he landed astride the bursting crinkly head of a rhubarb plant, cast a swift and anxious glance at the kitchen door and dodged under the pear trees to the further side of the yard. For once no strident voice bade him halt, and in a jiffy he had vaulted the privet hedge and was safe.

Philip lived a dozen houses southward, and while yet two doors distant Joe knew that Philip was at home. The excruciating wail of Philip's violin floated sadly forth on the afternoon air. Joe smiled as he heard. Philip's practice hour ordinarily ended at four, and here it was long after, and the inference was clear that he was prolonging the agony merely because the quarrel with his chum had left him with no better way of spending the time. In front of the Levering house Joe stopped and gazed frowningly up at the open window of the room above the porch. The practice paused for an instant and he raised his voice in the accustomed hail:

“Oo-ee-e-e!”

Philip appeared at the casement and looked down. Joe had made up his mind that if Philip's face showed triumph over his friend's capitulation the reconciliation should go no farther. But it didn't. Philip's countenance expressed faint surprise, instantly suppressed, and then casual and wary interest.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello!" answered Joe.

Philip worried the curtain cord with his bow for a moment. Finally, after a gulp that was almost audible below: "Come on up," he said.

Joe glanced up the street and then down, as though doubtful that his manifold interests would permit of his accepting the invitation. In the end, however, he nodded. "All right," he answered. Then, as if fearing he had shown too eager a spirit, he added: "Got something to tell you."

It was Philip's turn to nod, and, having done so, he disappeared from the window and Joe went, not too hurriedly, through the gate and in at the door. Philip awaited him, as usual, at the top of the stairway. Each ventured a doubtful and fleeting grin as they met, and then Philip closed the door of the little room and Joe flung himself on the bright-hued afghan that covered the bed by day. Having landed there, he reflected that he had meant to comport himself somewhat haughtily while making it clear to his host that only a matter of extraordinary importance would have brought him. But it was too late now. He glanced at the violin on the chair and then at the music rack with the bow lying along the ledge.

“Practicing?” he asked.

Philip nodded and Joe continued mercilessly. “Sort of late, ain’t you?” he inquired. Philip’s gaze wandered evasively.

“I got started kind of late,” he murmured. Then, realizing that the statement was not quite the truth, he amended it. “There wasn’t much else to do,” he said.

Joe stifled a triumphant chuckle. “Say,” he substituted, “did you tell Charley Nagel about—about the housewarming?”

“Kind of,” answered Philip. “I told him we were going to ask some of the fellows out to the camp Saturday.”

“Gee! Didn’t you know he’d go and tell Bull and that bunch?”

“Sure! I wanted him to,” replied the other stoutly. “After the way those fellows acted—”

“Well, you went and made a mess of it,” said Joe sternly. “Bull and his crowd are going out there to-night. They’re going to bust the door in and use our things and have a feed!”

“*Wha-a-t!* How do you know?”

Joe told him. “Bull said they’d ‘warm the house’ for us,” he added bitterly. “They’re going to take a steak and some onions and some ginger ale and—”

“Who’s going?” demanded Philip frowningly.

“The whole bunch: Bull and Harper and Pete and Dill Treadway and all those. Charley Nagel, too, I suppose. Six or seven, probably.”

“When?”

Joe shrugged. “Guess they’re on the way now. They went to get Dill and some others about half an hour ago. Then they had to buy the steak and things.” Joe looked at his nickel watch. “Probably they’re just about starting. I thought you’d want to know.”

Philip nodded thoughtfully. “Of course,” he muttered. “But I guess it’s too late to do anything. That’s a tough crowd, Joe, and they love a scrap. Even if we could get some of our crowd to go out there we couldn’t drive those fellows away. Gee, I wish I hadn’t said anything to Charley!”

“So do I,” said Joe morosely. “They’ll just about wreck the camp! And use up all our things too.”

Philip agreed gloomily. “Potatoes and coffee and everything! If we could only get out there ahead of them—”

“We can’t.”

Silence fell. Presently Philip arose and quietly returned the violin to its case and relegated the music stand to the closet. Joe watched him anxiously. He had firm faith in Philip’s wit and wisdom, but it seemed that here was a problem too difficult for the chum’s solving, and Joe’s hope languished. Outside, the evening shadows were lengthening fast. The strident whistling of the carrot-haired youth who delivered the evening paper grew near and there was a gentle thud as the damp copy of the *Evening Star* landed against the front door below.

“There’s the paper,” murmured Joe dejectedly.

“Get it if you like,” said Philip in abstracted tones.

He had seated himself again, hands in pockets and his long legs stuck out across the faded ingrain art-square. Joe murmured indifference to the *Star* and Philip continued to stare at the floor. Five o'clock struck from the steeple of the Presbyterian Church and Joe instinctively listened for the screech of the eastbound express as it reached the trestle. But before it came Philip lifted his head suddenly and exploded a question in the silence.

“What time does it get dark?” he demanded.

“Dark? Why, about seven, I guess,” replied Joe, startled.

“Think they’ll have their supper before that?”

“I don’t know. Why? If they get out there by five—”

“They won’t,” interrupted the other decisively. “It’s a mile and a half. Suppose they got the crowd rounded up and bought their things in half an hour. They’d get started about a quarter to five. Walking, the way they would, they’d take a good half hour to get there. Then they’d have to get into the cabin, and that would take them five or maybe ten minutes longer. Well, suppose they began to prepare supper right off, which they wouldn’t, it would take them another half hour to make the fire and peel the onions and all that, wouldn’t it?”

“Why, sure,” agreed Joe. “More than a half hour. They’d make Charley and Dill do the work, and they’re as slow as snails. What are you getting at, though?”

“I’m trying to figure out when they’d have that supper ready to eat. I don’t believe it would be ready much before seven.”

“Maybe not, but as I’m not going to eat it, it doesn’t mean much in my life.”

“Wouldn’t you eat some of it if you had a chance?” asked Philip, chuckling.

“With that gang of thugs?” retorted the other indignantly. “I would not!”

“Suppose they weren’t there, though?” suggested Philip gently.

“Weren’t there! Say, you’ve got a scheme! What’s it?”

Philip smiled. “Maybe I have,” he answered. “See what you think of it.”



CHAPTER IV

GHOSTS

Something like a half hour later Philip and Joe passed out of Central City on the road that led to Squirrel Lake. The sun was still above the purple, hazy hills beyond the river, but it was sinking fast. The warmth of the day was gone and a perceptible chill lay in the shadowed reaches of the turnpike as the chums pursued their unhurried way. As Philip said, there was nothing to be gained by getting to Camp Peejay before early dark, for daylight was no factor in the successful operation of his plan, and so they purposely walked slowly. Each was lightly burdened, Philip with his violin case, Joe with a bundle that was no larger and scarcely as heavy. They had taken time to change into their old clothes before starting. Their conversation consisted largely of anxious calculations to determine the probable supper hour at the camp. Philip held stoutly that the steak and onions would not be ready for consumption before darkness had fallen on the banks of Squirrel Lake, while Joe chose to be a bit pessimistic and prophesied that by the time they got there the repast would be over with.

The sun went down presently behind Squaw Ridge, leaving the western sky aflame with orange light. The shadows in the woods, on the travelers' right, deepened. From a marsh came the harsh croakings of frogs. A frail silver moon sailed well above the tree tops, increasing in radiance as the colors faded from the west. Twilight was well

on them when the two boys left the road and, proceeding cautiously along the winding wood path, finally came within sight of the cabin.

Philip halted while still a safe distance away and set down his burden, motioning Joe to do likewise. Ahead of them through the still barren branches of the trees they could see the unpainted cabin, plain against the shadows of the forest and the steel-gray, unruffled surface of the lake. From the window at the nearer end shone a light and from the stovepipe that pierced the roof orange-colored sparks floated upward to fade against the gloom of the big pine beyond, indicating that a brisk fire still burned in the stove. Sounds, too, reached them as they stood there in the growing dusk; the sound of laughter and of singing, and, once, the unmistakable clatter of a tin dish against the stove. Philip smiled.

“They haven’t eaten yet,” he whispered. “They wouldn’t have as much of a fire if they were through cooking.”

Joe nodded doubtful agreement and waited for orders. Philip viewed the scene of battle with the all-seeing eye of a general. Then: “The other side’s best,” he whispered. “We’d better go around at the back. Look where you’re going and, for the love of lemons, don’t let them hear you!”

Began then a journey of detour that tried Joe’s patience to the limit. The trees, young maples and beech, with here and there a spectral birch, grew close, and between them had crowded saplings and bushes, and progress and silence were incompatible from the first. Fortunately, there was so much noise within the cabin that a little of it outside went unheeded by the revelers, and after ten painful minutes the conspirators

reached the side of the cabin away from the road. Again depositing their luggage, they seated themselves behind a screening bush and waited. It was already dusk, there in the woods; a stone's throw away, the lake lay placid and shadowed, tiny wavelets lapped on the pebbles, their sound heard, however, only in the interims between the noises that issued through the open window of the cabin. Presently Philip gently removed the wrappings of the bundle and unfolded its contents. It lay, a pallid blur, in the darkness. Then he settled once more to the irksome task of waiting. Through the square of window the light of the hanging lantern within threw a path of fast-deepening radiance toward them. At times unrecognizable forms shadowed the casement. From the fact that those in the cabin still moved about and sang, and shouted to each other above the singing, the watchers were assured that the supper was still in course of preparation. From Joe came a deep sigh.

“Isn't it dark enough yet?” he whispered.

Philip looked about through the forest. “Pretty near,” he answered. “We'll wait five minutes longer.”

A hand went out and he drew the violin case closer.

In the cabin, Harper Merrill lifted the larger of the two thick steaks on a fork and peered at it doubtfully in the dim light. “I guess this one's done,” he announced. “Try the potatoes, Pete.”

“They're all right. Falling to pieces, some of 'em. Come on and—”

“Set that coffee back!” yelled Harper. “Gosh, you fellows would stand around and not move a hand! Find a knife, Dill,

and I'll cut this up.”

“I don't see but three plates,” announced Bull Jones disgustedly. “How we going to manage?”

“Guess those guys didn't plan to entertain so soon,” chuckled Gus Baldwin, who, with Charley Nagel, completed the company. “I'll eat mine in my fingers.”

“Got the bread out?” asked Harper impatiently. “Why don't you open some of that ginger ale, Bull?”

“Haven't any opener, that's why! You forgot to ask for one.”

“I didn't forget any more than you did,” Harper replied truculently, having just singed his fingers on the frying-pan. “I had enough to do, didn't I? I bought the steak and the onions—”

“Gosh!” exclaimed Dill. “What was that? Listen, fellows! Shut up a minute, Harp!”

Comparative quiet fell and all stood motionless. Harper with a steak held above the pan. There was no sound save the *lap-lapping* of the wavelets. “I don't hear anything,” growled Bull. “What did you think—”

But Bull didn't have to conclude, for suddenly on the stillness there came the most appalling moan imaginable. It began low and deep and went on and up to end in a shuddering wail of anguish, dying away in the silence and darkness at last to leave the six boys staring at each other with wide eyes and tingling scalps. For a long moment after the sound was still none moved or spoke. Then Pete Brooks asked in a dry-lipped whisper:

“What is it?”

Bull shook his shoulders and laughed, but the laugh was certainly forced. “Nothing but a cow,” he declared loudly. “Lost her calf, maybe.”

“It wasn’t any cow,” protested Harper soberly. “Besides, it came from the lake. Maybe it was a loon!”

“Loons don’t make a noise like that,” said Charley Nagel, shaking his head and looking uneasily at the window.

“Well, whatever it was,” said Bull grandly, “it cuts no ice with me. What you holding that beefsteak up there for, Harp? Trying to cool it? Gee, any one would think you’d seen a ghost, to look at you!”

Harper smiled twistedly and put the steak back. From the next pan came the pungent odor of scorching onions, and he pushed the pan further from the fire and looked about for a knife. Then it came again!

It was less a moan than a high-keyed, quivery scream this time, a scream of fear and pain that made the listeners’ hair lift on their heads and sent horrid cold shivers down their spines. No face in the cabin held much color when the last intolerable note passed sobbing away into the silence. Six boys stared stiffly at the window. A long moment went by. Charley Nagel sniffed then and Bull turned to him angrily.

“What’s your trouble?” he demanded. “What you scared of? Gosh, the lot of you look like you were dying!”

“You do, too,” whimpered Charley. “I—I want to go home!” he ended in a wail.

“Oh, shut up! Whatever it is, it’s just a—just a noise, ain’t it? Come on, Pete! Let’s have a look.” He took an unenthusiastic step toward the window. Pete hung back, however. “What you afraid of?” jeered Bull, finding courage in brow-beating the others. “Well, I’m going to, anyway.”

Shamed into it, Pete followed to the end of the little shack, and after a hesitant moment all save Charley did likewise. At the window Bull peered out. Before him the path of light led off into the forest. Right and left lay only gloom and the dimly seen trunks of trees. “Told you there wasn’t anything,” he growled. “Some sort of owl or something, I guess. Gee, you fellows—”

“*What’s that?*” stammered Pete, leaning across his shoulder. “*Look!*”

Bull looked and saw. At the end of the trail of radiance was an object that wiped away his courage and assurance as a wet sponge effaces markings on a slate. White and ghastly it was, wavering, uncertain; now tall and thin, now short and broad; but never still, its spectral bulk swaying from light to shadow, from darkness to radiance with unearthly motions.

“*Gosh!*” gasped Bull faintly.

Those behind pushed and shoved, holding an unwilling Bull at his post of observation, but they couldn’t keep Pete any longer. With a grunt of terror he hurled himself away and, seizing the nearest cap from the banquet board, he pulled the door wide and fairly hurtled through it. And as he went his voice broke startlingly on the air.

“*Ghosts! Ghosts! Ghosts!*”

Charley Nagel wasted no time in recovering his cap. He was but a scant three yards behind Pete at the porch. And as he took the leap into the darkness that horrible wail came again and put new power into his legs! Behind him, although he knew it not, followed four terror-stricken comrades. Bull and Harper, the last through the doorway, reached it together and, since the passage was narrow, hung there for a long instant, clawing, prancing, grunting, ere, with the desperation born of utter demoralization, they shot through with a jar that shook the cabin and legged it away in the darkness. In their ears sounded that unearthly wail, that banshee cry of fear and anguish, and their blood seemed to freeze in their veins. Bull went fair into a tree, bounded off with a loud grunt, rolled over twice, picked himself up once more and after that gained at every leap.

Presently the noise of crashing underbrush, the thud-thud of flying feet died away into silence. Once more the *lap-lap-lapping* of the little waves was the only sound about Camp Peejay.

Half an hour later Philip leaned back in his chair and sighed with repletion. Joe reached for the coffee pot and helped himself to a third cup of that steaming beverage, but he did it in a half-hearted, listless way that told its own story. Before the two lay the sorry fragments of what had once been two large, thick steaks, and there remained only traces of many fried onions and boiled potatoes. Of the dozen bottles of ginger ale but two had been opened. The others would be presently put away for future consideration. Philip sighed again and pushed his tin plate further away with a gesture that almost suggested distaste. "Gee," he murmured, "I'll never be able to get home to-night!"

Joe nodded sympathetically. “Wish we’d told the folks we weren’t coming,” he said. After a moment he added: “They didn’t come back, did they?”

Philip chuckled. “I knew they wouldn’t. Why, they’re almost to town now, and I’ll bet some of them are still running! You surely did look spooky in that sheet, Joe! I was mighty near scared myself!”

“Don’t say anything,” replied Joe feelingly. “Every time you made those sounds on your fiddle I nearly stopped breathing! Say, what do you suppose they thought it was?”

But that question had been discussed at length already and the subject held no more interest for Philip. Instead of offering further guesses he said: “We’d better get those invitations posted to-morrow.”

“Yes,” agreed Joe. There followed another long and dreamy silence. Then Philip spoke again.

“Joe,” he said, carelessly, “I’ve been thinking about painting this place and I sort of guess that maybe it ought to be green, like you said. You see——”

“Green nothing!” exclaimed the other. “Where do you get that stuff? Red’s the only color. Now look here——”

“I’m thinking maybe red would be too—too bright——”

“Not a bit of it! We’ll want to come here in the winter, and we’ll want it to look—er—cheerful——”

“Yes, but in the summer, green——”

“No, sir, it’s going to be red,” declared Joe heatedly.

“Well,” laughed Philip, “I guess there’s no sense having another quarrel about it! We’ll paint it red. Now let’s get the things washed up and put the place neat for the housewarming.”

It was Friday afternoon that Philip and Joe met Pete Brooks on Common Street. Joe was for going by with his usual curt nod, but Philip stopped and greeted their quasi enemy affably.

“Say, Pete, we’re going to have a sort of shindig out at the camp to-morrow afternoon. About a dozen of us, you know. Going to have supper and hang around awhile in the evening. Glad to have you come if you can.”

Pete looked hurriedly up and down the street. “I—I’d sure like to,” he stammered, “but—but I’ve got something I—I’ve got to do to-morrow. Sorry! Much obliged!”

He made off quickly and Philip turned a puzzled look on his chum.

“Acts almost like he didn’t really want to!” he murmured.

Joe thrust his arm through Philip’s again.

“I know it,” he agreed innocently. “Wonder why!”

CHAPTER V

THE VIGILANTES

“Hey, Joe! Joe Kenton!”

Joe swung dextrously between a big red truck and a light delivery wagon and slowed down at the curb, where, transferring one foot from pedal to sidewalk, he balanced his bicycle beside the boy who had hailed him.

“Hello, Sam,” he responded. “What’s it?”

Sam Sawyer, a likable-looking boy whose manner, and attire, suggested a leisure not enjoyed by his friend, smiled back. “Just wanted to see you,” he answered. “Have some?” He proffered a bag of peanuts. Joe dipped into it, but he frowned slightly as he did so.

“I’ve got to hurry,” he said a trifle importantly.

“Where are you going?” Sam glanced at the wire carrier affixed to the front of the bicycle which was piled with bundles.

“Temple Street,” replied Joe. “Mrs. Madden’s. She wants these things for supper—I mean dinner.”

“I should think she’d order them earlier then,” said Sam. “Say, did you hear about Warren Scott?”

Joe shook his head. “No. What’s it?”

““What’s it!”” mimicked the other. “They got his wheel yesterday.”

“Stole it, you mean?” asked Joe interestedly. “Who?”

“I don’t know, you idiot. The folks who’ve been stealing all of them, I suppose. He left it in front of Guyers’, and when he came out it was gone.”

“What time was it?” asked Joe.

“I don’t know. Some time after school. Why?”

Joe frowned in a puzzled fashion for a moment.

“Isn’t Warren’s bicycle a Malden?” he asked then. “Purple, with white lines?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I saw a fellow riding along Bennett Street yesterday about a quarter to five on a wheel that looked a lot like Warren’s. I thought, of course, it was his, because his is the only brand-new one I’ve seen in town, but I guess maybe it wasn’t.”

“I’ll bet it was!” exclaimed Sam excitedly. “What sort of a looking fellow was he? Did you know him?”

Joe shook his head. “I never saw him before, I guess. He was about your build, only maybe a year older, and wore dark clothes and a slouch hat. Sort of countrified fellow, I’d say. I’d been out to Grant Avenue with a crown roast for the Meyers, and it was about a quarter to five when I came into Bennett Street. I was through at the store and was going home. Bennett Street’s asphalted all the way to Ramsey, and so I turned in there instead——”

“Did he look as though he was——was stealing it?” demanded Sam eagerly.

“N-no, I just thought maybe Warren had loaned it to him. I didn’t think it belonged to him, somehow. He—he didn’t quite look like a fellow who’d own an expensive bicycle.”

“Why didn’t you ask him where he got it?” asked Sam impatiently. “You might have known it was Warren’s!”

“Well, I did think it was, but I didn’t know it had been stolen, did I?” replied Joe slightly indignant.

“You might have thought of it,” said Sam, “seeing there’s been about twenty bicycles stolen in Central City in the last two weeks! I’ll bet I’d have asked him mighty quick! Where do you suppose he was going to with it? Bennett Street’s more than two miles from Guyers’ place.”

Joe shook his head. “He was riding along south when I passed him. Going sort of fast, but not like he was in much of a hurry.”

“Well, say, you’d better come along to Warren’s and tell him about it,” said Sam. “Maybe the police can find it if we hurry.”

But Joe shook his head as his alarmed glance swept from his bundles in the carrier back over his shoulder to the City Hall clock. “I can’t now, Sam,” he said firmly. “I’ve got to hurry like the dickens. I’ll go around there after I get through at the store.”

“Maybe I’d better tell him right now,” said Sam, “and you can see him later. He ought to know as soon as possible, I guess. What time do you get through at the store?”

“Five, generally. Sometimes there’s a delivery after that.”

“Well, say, Joe, I’ll beat it over to Warren’s and come back to the store for you at five.”

Joe nodded. “All right,” he agreed. “Maybe you’d better. I’m not sure just which house Warren lives in. We don’t exchange visits very often,” he added dryly. He pedaled out into the crowded traffic of Central City’s principal business thoroughfare, the brown-papered parcels joggling about in the carrier, wormed his way between the two lines of westward-bound trucks and autos, cut under the nodding head of a big gray dray horse and turned into Cotting Avenue. From there he could make better time, and, since he was late, he pedaled fast. His steed was not a very speedy one at best and it was only by straining his leg muscles to the utmost that he could attain a celerity that approached his desire. The Madden cook was a formidable woman with an eloquent flow of language, and Joe had no wish to start the flow!

Although it was well after four when he hurried along the Madden side yard and thrust open the kitchen door, grumbles instead of scolding awaited him. He kept a still tongue while he placed the parcels on top of the refrigerator and dodged quickly out again. Ten minutes later, by following the streets of poorer paving and scanty traffic, he was back at the “Central City Market, Donaldson and Burns, Proprietors,” had leaned his bicycle against the wall beside the rear entrance and reported back in the shipping room. On Saturdays he was on duty until nine o’clock at night. As today, however, was only Tuesday he could be measurably sure of getting away at five or a few minutes after. To make it more certain he kept a sharp eye on the orders for the final delivery, with the result that when the last box of spinach and

crate of grapefruit had been brought in from the sidewalk and the big green curtains were down he was free to leave.

He found Sam Sawyer awaiting him outside. Sam had brought his own bicycle and as Joe wheeled his to the street Sam said: "We're to go right to the police station, Joe. Warren's going to meet us there. He's certain sure that was his wheel you saw."

"Yes, I guess it was," Joe agreed. "I've been thinking about it. It was new and shiny, just like his. I guess we'd better foot it, Sam. We'll get there faster this time of night."

Sam, who was already astride, viewed the congested traffic of Main Street and agreed. Together, their wheel beside them, they made a slow and difficult passage along the sidewalk, audibly censured by home-hurrying pedestrians. Sam, however, managed to keep conversation going in spite of frequent interruptions. "I guess there won't be many more wheels stolen after this," he announced confidently.

"Why?" asked Joe.

"Haven't you heard about the Vigilantes?"

Joe shook his head. "What's it?" he inquired.

"It's a society," replied Sam. "Sort of a secret society. Warren got it up. Just fellows who own wheels belong. It's to help the police stop bicycle thieves here in Central City, just like in some of the bigger cities. Over in Hammon there's been more than two thousand dollars' worth of bicycles stolen since the first of the year! And I guess there'll be that many swiped here, too, if it isn't stopped pretty quick. There's been about twenty stolen already!"

“When was this society started?”

“Last night, at Warren’s. He got a lot of the fellows together by telephone and we put it right through in about twenty minutes. Chief Connell was mighty tickled when we told him about it.”

“I suppose Warren’s president?”

“Yes, that is, he’s chief. I’m second chief and ‘Tilly’ Cross is——”

“Of course he had to have a fancy name for it,” commented Joe.

“What’s the matter with the name?” asked Sam indignantly. “If you knew your history——”

“Oh, it’s all right, I suppose. Only Warren’s always starting societies with funny names. Like during the war when he got up the Junior Secret Service and he and Talbot Fraser got pinched for looking in someone’s window one night——”

“That’s all right! The fellow was a German, wasn’t he? And even if he wasn’t a spy, he acted mighty queer. Every one said so!”

“How much does it cost to get into it?”

“The Vigilantes? It doesn’t cost a cent. It—it’s a patriotic organization.”

“Well, if it doesn’t cost anything I guess I might go in.”

“We-ell——” Sam’s tones were rather flat. “Well, you see, we’ve had to make a rule that only fellows who owned their own wheels could join. If we didn’t there’d be a lot of—of

riff-raff want to come in; fellows who'd want to join just for fun or curiosity.”

“I see,” nodded Joe. “Fellows like me, you mean.”

“No, I don't and you know it,” answered Sam indignantly. “You're all right, of course. But you don't own a wheel, and so—you see——”

“I don't see what difference it makes whether I own this wheel or whether Donaldson and Burns own it. It's just the same as if it was mine. I use it all the time. Besides, for that matter, it mighty near is mine now. There isn't much left of the original affair. I put on a new fork and new chain and new saddle and handlebars and had the thing mended half a dozen times because I thought that, seeing they let me use it away from the store, it was only fair I should keep it in shape. Gee, it was just an old second-hand wheel when Mr. Burns bought it. Anyway....”

“That's right,” said Sam soothingly, “but you see how it is, old man. Rules are rules, eh?”

“Sure,” agreed Joe. Then he chuckled. “Funny, though, isn't it, that the first fellow to do any vigilantizing should be me?”

“We-ell,” replied Sam, “of course we don't know yet that anything will come of it. That might not have been Warren's wheel, you see, after all.”

“Thought you seemed pretty certain about it awhile back,” remarked Joe dryly. “Well, I guess I can worry along without being a Vigilante, Sam. At that I dare say I'll nab as many bicycle thieves as any of the rest of you!”

“Of course,” agreed Sam heartily. He didn’t really think so, but he was glad that Joe wasn’t offended. He liked Joe, and if it hadn’t been for that rule he would have gladly seen him become a member of the new society.

They reached the central police station just then and wheeling their bicycles up the steps—for nowadays there was no certainty that even the precincts of the police station would be sacred to the thieves—they left them in the hall and turned into the room on the left. Warren Scott was awaiting them. He was a tall, very good-looking fellow of eighteen, a senior in high school and a person of prominence there. Secretly, Joe thought Warren rather a “pill,” but he might have been prejudiced. Their walks of life seldom met and their acquaintance was extremely casual. Perhaps it wouldn’t be fair to term Warren a snob, but his father held a responsible position with the largest industrial plant in Central City, was a man of means and lived accordingly, and naturally Warren found little to connect him with a boy who, however estimable his character might be, spent his vacation delivering roasts of beef and bags of potatoes. This evening, however, Warren’s manner was far more friendly. He seemed to meet the younger boy on a footing of social equality. Guided by a sergeant, they went into an inner room and into the august presence of Chief of Police Connell. The chief was corpulent, ruddy-faced, jovial, and he accorded the chief of the Vigilantes a most cordial welcome. To Joe it seemed that Chief Connell was rather more amused than impressed with the new society, but perhaps he just imagined it. Their business was soon over with. Joe gave his evidence clearly and, having recalled the incident carefully during the afternoon, was able to give a fairly good description of the

presumed bicycle thief. The chief, however, was not very hopeful of recovering the stolen property.

“You see, boys,” he said, “whoever’s working the game is pretty foxy. No one ever sees ’em at it. Probably there’s two or three operating together. Likely they send them off to Chicago or somewhere like that and sell them. They don’t get back on the market here, that’s sure. It’s easy to change a bicycle over so’s the owner would never know it, too. A little enamel is all they need. We haven’t had much luck so far, boys, and that’s the truth. Only recovered one and that was left in an alley. Had a broken frame, and the thieves probably didn’t want it. But now that you boys are going to help us I guess we’ll do better.” And the chief smiled broadly.

Going out, Warren thanked Joe quite nicely for his help. “It’s too bad, though, you couldn’t remember the fellow’s face better,” he added.

“He had his hat pulled down, you see,” replied Joe. “But I guess I’d know him if I ever saw him again.”

As Warren and Sam lived northward and Joe west, the three parted outside the station.

CHAPTER VI

JOE FINDS A CLUE

Next morning's *Courier*, which was Mr. Kenton's choice among the Central City dailies, had a full half-column about the Vigilantes. The *Courier* was quite enthusiastic, and predicted that the end of bicycle stealing was in sight. It gave much credit to Warren Scott, referring to him as "the son of Mr. Lyman W. Scott, secretary of the Sproule-Gary Corporation, and one of Central City's foremost citizens." At the end of the article it briefly announced that the theft of two more bicycles had been reported to the police. Joe grinned when he reached that. "Maybe, though," he reflected, as he hurried off, "the thieves hadn't heard about the Vigilantes!"

During the following week only one bicycle was reported missing. Whether this was due to the vigilance of the Vigilantes or to the fact that owners had pretty well learned their lesson and no longer parked their wheels beside the curb without locking them was a question. In any case, the papers commented favorably, praised the Vigilantes and the Police Department—all save the *Evening Star*, which, opposed to the present city administration, inquired loudly why the police neither apprehended the thieves nor recovered any of the stolen property. Sam Sawyer was very full of the honor of his position of second chief of the Vigilantes and took his duties very seriously. To Joe he confided that, while the society had not so far actually caused any arrests or

returned any stolen bicycles to their owners, it had undoubtedly to be credited with the sudden cessation of theft. With nearly a hundred fellows around the streets watching constantly, he pointed out there wasn't much chance for the robbers.

The following Monday the papers announced that between Saturday evening and midnight on Sunday eleven complaints of bicycle thefts had reached police headquarters! Some bicycles had been stolen—locks and all—from the curb, some had been taken from yards and porches and one, belonging to a minister on the outskirts of town, had been removed from the church vestibule! The *Courier* had an impassioned editorial that morning on the subject of the revival of crime and the *Star* gloated and howled in big black headings and pointed an accusing finger in direction of Police Headquarters. Somewhat to his disappointment, Joe did not encounter Sam that day. Of course Joe deplored the thefts and was sorry for those who had lost their wheels, but he was only human, and he was a little bit huffed because he had not been admitted to the Vigilantes.

It was nearly closing time on Tuesday when Burke, the store manager at the Central City Market, sought Joe in the shipping room. "There's an order to go out to the North Side, Joe. None of the teams is going that way, so you'd better hustle out on your wheel. The name's Jordan. Smithy's putting it up now."

Joe nodded. He didn't relish the errand, however, for it had been raining all day and was still at it, and the North Side streets were none too good under the best of weather conditions. But he made no protest and sought Smithy. The

address on the slip read “W. H. Jordan, Orcutt Road, 1 h’s e beyond Drayton place.” Joe had to look in the directory in the office before he could locate Orcutt Road. The directory informed him that it ran west from Line Street in Bowker’s Addition. With such meager intelligence he set forth at a few minutes past five, his carrier weighted down with bundles.

It was a good twenty minutes journey to Line Street, the latter part of it through a dejected and even unsavory part of town, and, having reached that street, an unpaved thoroughfare sparsely inhabited by truck farmers in a small way, he sought further enlightenment. It was still raining desultorily and the street was deserted by pedestrians. Finally he leaned his bicycle against a rickety fence and pushed through a gate beyond which a small dwelling, built largely of second-hand material, showed in the early twilight. The man who cautiously, even suspiciously, opened the unpainted door to him, proved to be Italian, and Joe had much difficulty in making his wants known. In the end, however, he learned that Orcutt Road was nearly a half-mile further on. The road was a veritable quagmire now, and he was frequently forced to dismount and push his bicycle through the muddy pools and over the uneven roadbed. Even the dwellings of the truck farmers ceased presently and the road—Joe had long since stopped referring to it as a street—stretched interminably away before him toward the darkening horizon with little to break its monotony save an occasional tree or group of bedraggled bushes. Eventually, though, a tumble-down farmhouse came into sight from under a slope of field well away from the road, and Joe decided that it must be the Drayton place. If it was, Orcutt Road could not be much further. Nor was it. Some fifty yards beyond the falling gate

giving on to the farmhouse lane, an ill-defined wagon track led to the right and at its junction with the road a leaning post held a board bearing the nearly illegible inscription: "Orcutt Road." Joe gave up the idea of riding the bicycle any further and detached the laden carrier and set it on his shoulder. The Jordan residence was further along the grass-grown track than he had supposed, and he had to shift his burden more than once before the house came into sight.

It was a very humble dwelling, low, ancient, weathered, half hidden by a plantation of tall poplars doubtless planted many years ago as a windbreak. There were several outbuildings visible, all quite as unkept as the house itself. In one of them a light burned feebly, a lemon-yellow radiance in the gathering gloom. In the house there appeared to be no light at all until having turned from the uncertain road, he crossed a patch of grass and drew nearer. Then three things happened almost simultaneously: a dog barked ferociously from the direction of the house, a voice challenged from nearer at hand and a light sprang dimly into sight behind the narrow sidelights of the entrance.

"You from the store?" asked the voice.

A dark form sprang suddenly into view a dozen paces away and approached. So did the dog, a big black nondescript who growled menacingly as he bounded forward. "Get out o' here, Gyp! Beat it or I'll bounce a brick off your bean!" commanded the voice compellingly. Gyp stopped growling and began to sniff instead, circling around the visitor at a few yards' distance.

"I've got an order here from the Central City Market for Jordan," said Joe. "All right?"

“Sure,” answered the other. “Give it to me.” He proved to be a boy some two years older than Joe; perhaps eighteen. He was tall and broad-shouldered and uncouth. His clothes seemed too large for him and fell into strange wrinkles as he stepped close to take the wire basket. He wore no hat, and Joe found the fact oddly worrying him for the instant. Then, as he yielded the carrier and said, “Four dollars and thirty cents to pay, please,” he knew why.

“All right,” said the boy gruffly in his unpleasant voice, and started toward the rear of the house, Joe was following more slowly when the other turned. “You wait here,” he said in a threatening tone. “Watch him, Gyp.”

The dog growled and Joe stopped very still. For several minutes boy and dog stared at each other there in the rain and gloom, but Joe didn't see Gyp at all. He saw, instead, a figure in a dark slouch hat bending over the handlebars of a shining purple bicycle, and although the hat was now wanting, he knew beyond the possibility of any doubt that the youth on the bicycle and the unpleasant-voiced boy who had disappeared beyond the corner of the house were one and the same.

His thoughts were interrupted by the return of the boy with the empty carrier and the money. “Here you are, kid,” he grunted. “Now beat it.”

“Guess I'd better,” said Joe pleasantly. “It's a long way out here, isn't it? Gee, I was nearly bogged down getting along that road!”

“Well, why didn't they send a team then?” demanded the other.

“There wasn’t any of them coming this way to-day. That’s a nice dog you’ve got,” Joe snapped his fingers invitingly, but Gyp only growled deeply. “Is he cross?”

“He don’t take to strangers,” answered the other gruffly. “Come here, Gyp. I’ll look after him till you’re out o’ the way, kid. Better get a move on.”

“All right. Good night,” said Joe. He turned back across the ragged and sodden lawn and gained the road. There he dared one brief backward look. Boy and dog still stood where he had left them, unmoving, silent, two dark forms in the falling darkness. The light in the house had gone, but that in one of the outbuildings—possibly a stable—had increased in brilliancy. Against its radiance a figure—two figures—moved, coming and going from sight across the square opening of a wide doorway. Then Joe brought his eyes back to the uneven road and floundered on toward the road and his bicycle.

His thoughts were very busy indeed as he pushed and pedaled his way home.

It was quite dark by the time he swung into his own street, and the infrequent lights left pockets of gloom between them. It was in one of these that a voice came to Joe above the swishing sound of his tires on the wet asphalt.

“Hey!” said the voice imperatively. “Hold up!”

Joe obeyed, coming to a halt as a dark figure detached itself from the deeper darkness across the street. The figure resolved itself into the burly form of a policeman who, joining the boy, peered suspiciously from him to the bicycle.

“What’s it?” asked Joe.

“Whose wheel is that?” demanded the officer gruffly.

“Mine,” replied Joe. “That is, it belongs to Donaldson and Burns. They let me use it.”

“What’s your name? Where do you live?”

Joe told him, explaining his errand and indicating the wire carrier as confirmatory evidence, and the officer grunted as though satisfied and went on. So did Joe, arriving home a minute later very wet and very hungry; and also secretly rather excited. He had difficulty getting to sleep that night.

The next morning three more bicycles were reported stolen and the papers carried an advertisement inserted by a hastily formed “Bicycle Dealers’ Association” offering a reward of one hundred dollars for information leading to the apprehension and conviction of the thieves. Joe read that notice with a deal of interest. He would have liked a partner in his contemplated enterprise, but the only fellow he could think of was Sam, and there were reasons why Sam wouldn’t answer.

When he reached the store Joe sought Mr. Burke and asked to be allowed to leave a half hour earlier to-day. The manager objected from force of habit, but finally consented. At half-past four Joe begged some meat trimmings from the hand butcher, detached the parcel carrier from his bicycle and set off.

The afternoon was cloudy and chill, but rainless, as he followed his route of yesterday to within sight of the Drayton farm. There he concealed his wheel in a clump of bushes, climbed the fence and found himself in a meadow through which a dry brook meandered. It was still broad daylight and

the problem of reaching the Jordan place unseen looked difficult. He dropped into the brook, however, and, well hunched over, began a cautious journey. The brook crossed the meadow by many turns toward a group of tumble-down outbuildings well away from the Drayton house. Reaching them at last, unchallenged, he abandoned concealment and passed behind them toward a fence a hundred yards distant. The fence was overgrown on both sides with trees and bushes and he had trouble breaking through. But when he had he was rewarded. A quarter of a mile away to his left the Jordan house was in sight beyond a corner of the clustered outbuildings and between him and the latter stood a neglected orchard overgrown with tall weeds and littered with dead branches. Before proceeding he reassured himself by feeling of the packet of meat in his pocket. He was in far greater awe of Gyp than any of the human denizens.

Traversing the orchard was like playing Indian. Joe dodged from one tree to another, watching sharply the while. As he neared the outbuildings a sound reached him such as might be made by tapping a metal bar with a hammer, and although it ceased almost at once it proved that someone was close at hand, probably in that shed where he had yesterday seen forms moving to and fro. What he most dreaded to hear, the challenging bark of Gyp, didn't disturb him. Behind the stable and sheds, which now completely hid the dwelling, lay a mass of discarded farm machinery, lumber and miscellaneous rubbish half hidden by grass and bushes. Three windows stared across at him. Of these, two were in the shed in the middle, perhaps once a carriage house, and the third, high up, was in the building on the extreme left. The stable, at the right of the row, was windowless at its rear.

Joe was certain that the center building was the one in which he was to find an answer to his problem, and that the answer would come to him by means of one of its two windows. To reach it, however, he must cross a good twenty yards of open space, and, while the shadows were gathering, it was not yet even twilight, and he hoped devoutly that no one—least of all Gyp—would be looking his way!

Of course he could wait for darkness, but then the shed might be deserted and unlighted and he would discover nothing. No, it was best to go ahead now and chance it. If he was discovered and pursued he could, he thought, trust his legs to get him out of danger. Taking a deep breath, he bent low and ran.

CHAPTER VII

THE LONE CHASE

A few yards short of his goal, his foot caught on something and Joe measured his length with a force that almost drove the breath from his body. Fortunately the fall had left him in a tangle of bushes, and there he lay a moment and listened with fast-beating heart for a rush of footsteps. But the only sound that came to him was that of low voices from beyond the thin wooden wall a half-dozen feet away, and after a cautious look about him he squirmed forward again. To reach the nearer of the two windows he must make his way across the remains of an abandoned mowing machine, and that task was no slight one if he was not to proclaim his presence to those inside. But he managed it presently and was crouching, his head close to the weathered boards, listening to the voices. There were evidently at least two men in the shed. One spoke harshly yet quite distinctly, the other emitted only unintelligible mutterings.

“Kick the burlap over here, Jimmy,” said the first. A deadened metallic sound followed, as though a length of pipe had fallen on a carpeted floor. “There, that’s the last, ain’t it?” There came a creaking as of carriage springs and the mutterings of the second worker. “Yeah, I know,” went on the other, as if in response to a suggestion, “but we’ve got to take a chance now and then, ain’t we? Get it covered up good and there won’t be no trouble. Better change those number plates next thing. Huh?” The mutterings came again and the

voice which Joe could understand broke in impatiently on them. "Oh, you give me a pain, Jimmy! We've made the trip four times, ain't we? And we got by all right, didn't we? Well, then, forget the crepe-hanging! Besides, this is the last lot, I guess. They're getting het up here. When they begin offering rewards it's a good time to move on. Huh? ... You and your hunches. You're always having 'em, Jimmy, and they don't never come true. Say, now, do they? Where's those plates? All right, go ahead, and I'll finish the load off."

Something that sounded like a hammer struck the floor with a bang and footsteps scraped about. There was a grunt and then once more came the noise of creaking springs. Joe, unable to restrain his curiosity any longer, raised his head until his eyes topped the window-sill. The pane was dusty and draped with cobwebs, and the interior of the shed was shadowed, but after a second spent in accustoming his eyes to the gloom within he found that he was looking at the back of an automobile which was standing within some four feet of the rear wall. He was too low to see within it, although the top was down. Nearer the floor, something moved and the boy's gaze lowered to a red-brown thatch of hair, to a shoulder clad in greasy blue denim. A squeaking sound suggested a nut being forced tight. One of the men, probably the one who mumbled, was changing the rear number plate. The second man was not in sight, for the automobile hid the rest of the shed from Joe's view. The squeaking ceased and suddenly the upper part of the worker's body shot upward within a few inches of Joe's eyes and the boy dropped quickly below the window.

"All set," came the voice from inside. "Let's eat and get going, Jimmy. It'll be dark in an hour. Huh? ... Oh, there ain't

no danger I'm telling you! Ain't we got a right to haul a load of furniture over to Casper? Anyway, we'll keep out of the town this time; take it along by the river. The roads are rotten, but we can make 'em if we don't hurry too much. I'm aiming to get to Chi along about three-thirty. Best way's to get the car unloaded and in the yard before daylight. Come on, let's go."

Joe listened intently. Footsteps crossed the floor, a door banged shut, the barking of a dog came from nearer the house. A voice called, "Slim! You, Slim!" The dog barked louder. Voices mingled, too indistinct, however, for Joe's understanding. A door slammed and quiet reigned.

After a moment Joe slipped quickly back to the nearest apple tree and, making himself as small as possible, stared thoughtfully through the head-high crotch at the back of the shed. Low-hanging branches concealed him and gathering twilight was already making objects uncertain. Joe did some hard thinking during the next five minutes. He wanted very much to see what was in that automobile in the shed, but the risk would be great. Even if he managed an entrance through a window there was the possibility of being caught by the sudden return of one of the men. Getting out of a window in a hurry is not always an easy matter. Besides, he reflected, he was practically certain what he would find if he did investigate; as certain as a fellow could be without actually seeing. He relinquished thought of further investigation and considered, instead, how to circumvent the thieves. For Joe was quite sure that they were thieves. He was quite sure that he had found the headquarters of the gang who had been stealing bicycles in Central City. As he figured it out, the members of the gang stole the wheels and brought them out

here to this deserted and almost forgotten house and hid them away until they had enough to make a load. Then they were placed in the automobile—having been, perhaps, first taken down and compactly bundled in burlap—and transported over the road to Chicago. How many there were in the gang he didn't know; three, at least—not counting Gyp! From what he had overheard, it was plain that the men meant to make a start as soon as they had eaten supper. Somehow, he must communicate with the police, and that speedily. Once out of the town there were half a dozen roads they might take, and while by telephoning ahead, they might be intercepted there was always the chance that they might slip through. Whatever was to be done should be done at once. Joe wondered if there was a telephone at the Drayton house. He was pretty certain, though, that there wasn't; pretty certain, indeed, that in coming out here he had left the last telephone pole well over a half-mile nearer town. Therefore the best thing to do was to get to the nearest telephone as soon as possible and call up the police station.

With a last look at the shadowy bulk of the shed, and tossing the packet of meat away, he crept back through the orchard and climbed the fence again. Beyond it, he sacrificed caution to speed and ran as fast as the uneven ground would let him. As he had suspected, no telephone wire entered the Drayton house, nor were there any poles in sight along the road toward which he hurried. To his disgust, he mistook the clump of bushes where he had hidden his bicycle and wasted more than one precious minute finding it. At last, though, he was mounted and pedaling hard over the lumpy, rutted road toward the distant city.

Twilight was coming fast now. He wondered how much time had elapsed since he had heard the house door close behind the men. He had, he figured, remained behind the shed a good minute before returning to the orchard, and had spent perhaps five minutes beside the tree and had probably consumed another five minutes in reaching the road and finding his bicycle. Consequently some twelve minutes had already gone by. If he got his telephone connection in another five minutes he would be doing very well indeed, and by the time the alarm was given nearly twenty minutes would have elapsed. In that time, reflected Joe, the thieves might well eat a hurried supper and start off on their journey. They had spoken of circling the center of the city and keeping along by the river, and if they did the car must go slowly, for the roads it would have to traverse were of dirt and little traveled, save for the mile or so of parkway that finally led to the bridge. The bridge! That was the place to watch for them! Then Joe's sudden elation died a quick death. The thieves would have their choice of three bridges, after all, or, if they liked, could swing northward to Porterville and cross the river by the ferry. As he sped along making far slower progress than he desired, he watched anxiously for signs of a telephone. He had already covered a half-mile, he was sure, and still no poles came to sight. A suburban road, showing at long intervals a house of the poorer sort, led off to the right, and Joe slowed down and considered. This was the road the thieves would doubtless take if they held to their plan of following the river in its curve around the city. But there were no telephone poles on it and so it offered no attraction to the boy, and he was getting up speed once more when, from behind him, came the unmistakable roar of a motor. He looked back. Far down the

road over which he had come two white eyes of light bored into the half darkness. Dismayed, Joe again slowed down, stopped, placed one foot on the ground and, undecided, waited. The approaching car came nearer and nearer, slowed a trifle and whisked its white orbs to the branching road. There were two forms on the front seat and the back of the car appeared to be piled high with furniture. Against the lighter sky Joe caught the silhouette of table legs stretched pathetically, helplessly upward. Then the car was gone.

What Joe did then was done without reflection. Probably if he had paused long enough to reason he would have continued on in search of the nearest telephone. Instead, however, he switched his bicycle about, set feet to pedals again, thump-bumped to the corner and set off along the strange road in pursuit of a tiny, dim red light.

The automobile was not going very fast now. It couldn't and remain in the road. Chuck-holes were frequent and in places the roadbed was a soft and yielding mire of wet clay and loam. Joe almost came to grief in one such place, and, perhaps fortunately, since what was almost a tumble drew his gaze to the side of the road. At some not long distant time an effort to sell house lots there had led to the building of several blocks of concrete sidewalk. It had apparently never paid for itself, since few houses had been built, but there it was, and it took but an instant for Joe to reach it. After that for some four or five blocks he sped at full speed, his foot on one side whisked by the encroaching weeds, and saw to his delight that he had gained on the more cautious car.

Then the concrete sidewalk gave out and he was forced back to the road, but the red tail light was scarcely more than

a block away from him and he didn't doubt that from now on, until the car left the city environs, he would be able to hang on to it. He hoped to find a policeman to whom he could give warning. Failing that, he could at least determine the road taken by the thieves and so make more certain their capture.

Stone paving took the place of dirt and the automobile gathered speed. But it was evident to Joe that the driver was seeking to avoid all suggestion of flight. Even when still later, a stretch of rather worn asphalt came the car did not speed up as the pursuer feared it would, but trundled along at a brisk yet unhurried pace. Even so, however, it drew gradually away from Joe until, at the end of the asphalt, it had increased its lead to nearly three blocks. By then they were among the factories, in a poorly lighted and, at the present hour, well-nigh deserted part of town. A huge grain elevator loomed beside the way, a black, gigantic specter in the early darkness. The bicycle bounced over the tracks of a railway spur. Between the silent buildings a steel-gray ribbon, reflecting an occasional light from the farther bank, showed. The river had drawn close, and in another minute or two Joe would know whether the car ahead meant to continue the swing about the city to one of the three bridges or to turn at right angles and take the Porterville road. As he struggled on, working desperately to bring the bicycle back to its former place in the race, he searched for the welcome sight of a dark blue uniform. Yet he saw none. If, he reflected indignantly, he hadn't wanted a policeman the street would have been full of them! As it was, though, the corners were empty. No gallant guardian of law and order swung a night stick under an infrequent lamp post.

The railroad yard was beside him now, on his left hand, and the sounds of shunting freight cars and of exhausting steam reached him. Beyond a long freight house a swinging lantern made yellow arcs in the darkness. Then, almost before he was aware of its proximity, the Porterville road swung away from the cobbled thoroughfare and the red tail light of the car ahead was whisked from sight.

CHAPTER VIII

JOE RESIGNS

I nstinctively Joe worked harder at the pedals and gained the corner; was around it before the futility of further pursuit came to him. He looked back for sight of a policeman but saw only the empty street. Before him stretched a long, gradually curving road, picked out at long intervals by lights. Far ahead now was that tiny red speck that he had been following. Porterville was two miles away, yet at Porterville there might be an officer at the ferry house. At least, thought Joe, he could give the alarm there. He was pretty tired, more tired, indeed, than he realized, but he knew that he was good for two miles more. He wished devoutly that he was mounted on Sam's light, high-gear'd Arrow instead of the cumbersome heavy steed beneath him! All these reflections had not relaxed his efforts, and now he was well out on the Porterville road, with the sluggish river flowing at a stone-throw on his left. The automobile was far away, but he could still see the tail light, and he was presently encouraged to find that it was not gaining on him. Perhaps even on this unfrequented road the thieves were not minded to attract notice by too much speed. There was, too, as Joe had heard, a motor policeman detailed for that stretch, and he guessed the thieves were afraid of being halted. The recollection of the motor policeman brought a throb of joy to Joe. If he could find him the race would soon be over!

But he didn't find him. It seemed to Joe that to-night, when they were needed the worst way, all the policemen in the world had utterly vanished! In the end he toiled into the tiny hamlet of Porterville, to use his own expression, "just about all in." The car had disappeared from sight half a mile back, but he was pretty sure that he knew where it was. The business center of Porterville consisted of about as many stores as there were corners at the intersection of two streets. Of these, one showed lights, and in front of it a handful of loiterers were standing underneath the inscription "General Store—U. S. Post Office." Joe swung up to the curb, panting hard.

"Say, where's there a cop?" he demanded breathlessly.

No one replied for an instant. Then a tall youth turned and hailed a man standing in the doorway. "Hey, Gene, seen Bill Cooper lately?"

"Bill? Yeah, he was around about ten minutes ago. Guess he's down to the wharf."

"What you want him for?" inquired a third citizen of the busy metropolis. But Joe was already under way once more.

Some two hundred yards off, was the ferry house, and even as he stepped on his pedals there came a hoarse warning blast. He sped like mad down the descending street. As he came to the slip there was a jangling of bells, the gates began to close and water was churned from the paddles of the boat. Bill Cooper was forgotten in that instant. Joe saw his quarry escaping and the instinct of the chase spurred him on unthinkingly. There was room between the closing gates to pass, although he scraped his handle grips and then he

dismounted at a run, tossed the old wheel across a slowly widening expanse of water and jumped.

He landed atop the wheel, picked himself up and faced an irate deck hand. “What you trying to do? Kill yourself?” demanded the man. “Don’t you know you can’t get aboard after the gates are closed?”

“They weren’t closed,” answered Joe, “—quite!”

“You come along o’ me and see the captain,” replied the other. “You ain’t paid your fare, for one thing.”

Joe hadn’t thought of that, and now, feeling anxiously in a pocket, he wondered whether he was able to. But he was, for the fare was but seventeen cents for him and the bicycle, and he paid it while the burly captain growled him a lecture on boarding the ferry after the bell had rung. That over, he went back to the stern of the little boat, recovered his wheel and looked about him. The *River Queen* had a narrow cabin on each side and space between for some six vehicles. On this trip that space was occupied by but three, a farmer’s wagon and two automobiles. It took but an instant to determine, even in the dark of the unlighted tunnel, that the foremost automobile was apparently piled with furniture. Joe sauntered nearer. Although the tail light appeared to have been affixed in a position from which its rays could not possibly illumine the number plate, the latter was decipherable with the aid of the reflections from the car behind. Joe read and made a mental memorandum: 21,678. The tonneau of the car, a rather large one of good make but an old vintage, appeared to hold only household furniture. There was, first, a strata of mattresses, then a bundle of bedding, a chest of drawers, the pathetic table, a clothes

basket filled with odds and ends and other objects not to be determined. Ropes passed and repassed over the load. In the seat ahead the two men sat huddled and silent. Joe went back and pondered deeply.

Perhaps, he thought, he should have found Bill Cooper, as he had at first meant to do, but suppose Mr. Cooper hadn't been at the wharf? In that case Joe would have had to hunt for him and convince him of the truth of his strange story, by which time the thieves would have reached the other side, chosen their route—Joe didn't know how many roads might lead away from there—and secured a good start. As it was now, he at least had the thieves and their booty still under his eyes, and he had thought of a plan whereby he could continue to keep them there until the heavy hand of the Law should descend upon them. On the whole, he concluded, he hadn't made a mistake. And, having reached this encouraging conclusion, he sought the deck hand, now recovered from his choler, and held conversation, with the result that the bicycle was presently stored in a locker to await Joe's return. Then the *River Queen* bumped into her slip, gangplanks were hauled aboard, the automobiles came to life again, chains rattled and the dozen or so passengers hurried ashore.

Save for the ferry house and a small store, closed and dark, this terminus of the ferry line had little to offer. Straight ahead, a road climbed upward to the summit of the river bluffs. To right and left a second road followed the stream up and down. The passengers climbed into waiting vehicles or walked away into the gloom. Joe, one of the first to land, stepped into the shadow of the ferry house and waited.

The first automobile creaked over the gangplank and up the incline. As it passed, Joe ducked from the shadow of the little building to the shadow of the car. At its rear was a stout tire carrier occupied by two spare tires. Joe clasped the upper rim of a tire and swung himself up, his knees colliding painfully with something decidedly hard and unyielding. Unthinkingly he uttered an ejaculation of pain, but fortunately the roar of the car as it breasted the hill ahead drowned it. Joe squirmed himself into a position which, if not very comfortable, was secure. There was no danger of detection and he was certain that he could hold on back there until Fortune, which had so far sadly flouted him, relented. The car rushed at the hill and took the first of it nobly. Then, however, its speed lessened and lessened and the driver shifted to second, and finally to low, and the summit was gained at no more than a snail's pace. Once on level ground, however, it fairly flew, and although he was to some extent protected from the rush of the wind, Joe became sensible of the fact that the air up here on the hills was far colder than below in the valley. He began to realize his weariness, too. The few minutes on the boat had restored his breath, but they hadn't taken the ache from his muscles. The glamour of excitement was waning now and he gave thought to his position. He was a good six miles from home and he had exactly ten cents to his name. He couldn't return by the ferry, but would have to keep down the river to the first bridge; and he had a sickening notion that the first bridge was a lot nearer ten miles away than five! Well, there was no help for it. Having gone so far, he would see the matter through—even if he had to keep right on to Chicago! He would show Warren Scott and his Vigilantes that when it came to results there were others!

These musings were suddenly interrupted. The car was slowing down! At the cost of another ache Joe craned his head around the side of the tonneau. A short distance ahead was a broad illumination of white light and a blazon of red amidst it. They were approaching a roadside filling station and were going to stop! This, reflected Joe, was no place for him, for the gasoline tank was under his feet. As the car came to a pause he jumped down and scuttled across the road and into the black shadows of the trees.

From a small building beyond the pump with its brilliant red sign atop, came a man who after an exchange of words with the men in the car, set about refilling the tank. Joe watched and waited and thought hard. If he was to regain his place he must be quick about it and yet not be seen. That wouldn't be so easy. If the filling station man saw him—he broke off abruptly. His gaze, wandering beyond the pump, had caught sight through one lighted window of a telephone on the wall of the little building. Why go any further? Here was his chance. He would tell his story and get the man to telephone to the first town beyond! A moment later the red tail light was growing smaller down the road and Joe was confronting the man from the doorway, stammering badly in his eagerness. The man stared back at him, startled.

“What?” he asked. “You want gas?”

Joe shook his head and tried again.

“Telephone,” he ejaculated. “Police!”

The man brought the chair down on all four legs with a bump and waved a hand. “Help yourself,” he directed. “What’s up? Accident?”

Joe shook his head again. “You do it,” he begged. “I—I haven’t got enough breath!”

“All right,” agreed the other good-naturedly. “What do you want?”

“Telephone the nearest town,” panted the boy, “and tell the police to stop that car, the one that just went by here. The number’s 21,678. Tell them it’s full of bicycles stolen in Central City, and—”

The man paused with the receiver off the hook, shook his head and laughed. “You’re crazy, kid,” he jeered. “That car had furniture in it. I know the fellows. They’ve stopped here two—three times lately. Who’s been stringing you?”

“Honest, it’s so!” protested Joe. “I’ve followed them all the way from their house. They’re bicycle thieves. The furniture’s just to fool folks. The bicycles are underneath. I know!”

The man looked less assured. “Well, that’s funny,” he said. “Hold on, what was the number?”

“21,678,” answered Joe.

“Wrong, son. That car’s number is 5,906. I’ve seen it two—three times and I remember. I’ve got a habit of noticing number plates.”

“They changed it this evening,” said Joe. “Won’t you please telephone?”

“Changed it? Well, say, I didn’t look at the number just now. All right, but, look here, kid, if this is some silly hoax I’ll get in a dickens of a mess with the Winsted police! Sure

you ain't stringing me? Sure you know what you're talking about?"

Joe nodded dumbly. The man grunted, still doubtful, but put in the call. Then, while he waited, he eyed Joe dubiously. "Say," he began, "if you're double-crossing me—" He broke off then. "Hello! Police Headquarters? Huh? Well, say this is Perkins, Harry Perkins, out at the filling station on the Bluffs Road. Yeah! Say, there's a kid here—yeah, young fellow—that's right. He wants you to stop a car that just went through here, number 21,678, he says. He says the guys in it are a couple of thieves and that they've got the car filled with bicycles swiped over in Central. Huh? Yeah, that's right, two, one, six, seven, eight. All right, I'll hold it."

"Did he—is he going to do it?" asked Joe eagerly.

"Guess so. He told me to hold the line. Probably—hello! What? Sure, here he is!" He motioned Joe and put the receiver in his hand. "Wants to talk to you," he explained.

From far away came a faint, gruff voice. "Hello! Where'd you get that story from, my boy?"

Joe told his tale, standing first on one foot and then on the other, shouting loudly to convey his certainty, to convince the unseen and evidently somewhat incredulous official. In the end he must have succeeded, for the official broke into a repetition with:

"All right, son! You stick around there till you hear from us. We may need you. What's your name? Kenton? All ri—"

Then silence. After a moment Joe hung up and lifted himself painfully to a table amongst an array of grease cans. The owner of the station eyed him with growing curiosity.

“Say, that’s some story of yours, kid,” he said. “What were you in, a car or a motorcycle?”

“Bicycle,” answered Joe listlessly. Now that the end had come he was fast losing interest in the matter. About all he could think of was the way his legs ached!

“Bicycle!” exclaimed the man. “Gee-gosh, aren’t you tired?” Joe nodded. “Sure you are! Here, sit in the chair, kid. I’ll say you’re a plucky one! Gee-gosh! All that way on a bicycle! And didn’t lose ’em!”

The man talked on, but Joe, his eyes closed, perilously near asleep, didn’t really hear him: or, at the best, he heard just occasional detached words or phrases: “... Stopped here two—three times ... pleasant guys ... funny, though ... always loaded with furniture ... never noticed ... ought to hear ... police....”

Joe was concerned with something besides his legs now, and that was his stomach. He had suddenly remembered that he hadn’t had anything to eat, except a couple of sandwiches and a banana, since morning. Perhaps he actually did sleep for a few moments, for he certainly didn’t hear the telephone bell ring, and here was the filling station man saying excitedly: “Got ’em, kid! They’re pinched and you were dead right! The chief says the car’s plum full of bicycles! Hey, wake up and listen! They’ll be along pretty soon and take you home. He says there’s a reward out and he guesses you’ll get it!”

“I wish,” muttered Joe sleepily, “it was a dish of soup and a hunk of toast and I had it now!”

“Hey, Joe! Joe Kenton!”

Joe turned his bicycle across the street and drew up in front of Sam Sawyer. “Hello,” he said. “What’s it?”

“Want to see you a minute. How’s it feel to be a hero and have your picture in the papers and everything?”

Joe grinned embarrassedly. Then he glanced at the bundles in the carrier and frowned. “I’ve got to hurry,” he said. “I—”

“Well, wait a minute, can’t you? Have you got that reward yet?”

“No, but they said they would send a check to-day. I dare say it’s over at the house now.”

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Sam, a bit enviously.

Joe smiled. “Put it in the bank for the present,” he answered. “It’s going to come in mighty handy later. Help a lot with school expenses, you know.”

“Yes,” agreed Sam. “Say, have you seen Warren to-day?”

“Warren? No.” Joe glanced impatiently at the city hall clock and from thence to the bundles.

“Then you haven’t heard?” exclaimed Sam.

“Guess not. What’s it?”

“Why, about the Vigilantes! About being a member!”

“Who?”

“You! Warren called a special meeting last evening and you were elected to membership, Joe! Unanimously!”

Joe looked back unemotionally. “That so?” he asked. “Mean that I’m a Vigilante now?”

“Sure!”

“In good standing? All my dues paid in full?”

“Of course, only there aren’t any—”

“Well, then,” interrupted Joe, spurning the curb with his left foot and settling in the saddle, “you tell ’em I’ve resigned.”

“Resigned!” gasped Sam.

Joe nodded as he rolled away. “Yes, you tell ’em I’ve got me a society of my own, Sam. It’s called the—the Go Get ’Em Society. So long!”

CHAPTER IX

GUS BILLINGS NARRATES

In August Hal wrote persuasively from the north, renewing his invitation to Joe. Joe was to come up and spend the last fortnight before school began again, insisted Hal. With that hundred dollars in the bank, Joe might, he reflected, allowably treat himself to that trip; but he didn't. It would have cost him all of twenty dollars, to say nothing of two weeks' pay at Donaldson and Burns'! Instead, Joe and Philip spent a whole five days at Camp Peejay. That is, they went out there every evening after Joe was through at the store and stayed until the next morning. Then, after an early and simple breakfast, they hurried back to town awheel, Philip on a borrowed bicycle scarcely more presentable than Joe's. But they had all of Thursday out there and spent the day fishing, later supping on their catch of four perch and a wicked-looking hornpout.

The last of September saw Joe back at Holman's School. He and Hal had secured 14 Routledge again and there didn't seem to Joe much more to ask for. Unless, of course, it was a place on the football team. But that was probably unattainable. Last fall he had striven hard for some sort of recognition from the gridiron rulers and had failed. But this year he returned with unfaltering courage, reporting on the field the first day of practice and never quite losing heart. As a result of perseverance—and one or two other factors—he lasted the season through. One of the factors was Gus

Billings, and, since the story is really Gus's, suppose we let Gus tell it in his own way.

It has always seemed to me that the fellow who wrote the story of that game for the Warrensburg paper missed a fine chance to spring something new. It was a pretty good story and had only about a dozen rotten mistakes, like where it said I missed a tackle the time their quarter got around our right in the first period. I wasn't in that play at all, on account of their making the play look like it was coming at center and me piling in behind Babe Linder. The fellow who missed that tackle was Pete Swanson, I guess. Anyway, it wasn't me. Maybe I did miss one or two, but not that one, and that time they got nearly fifteen yards on us, and a fellow doesn't like to be blamed for slipping up on a play like that.

Still, as I said, the story was as good as the run of them, and the paper gave us plenty of space, just as it generally does seeing that there are nearly three hundred of us at Holman's and our trade's worth quite a bit of money to the Warrensburg stores. But where that reporter chap fell down was in not recognizing what you might call the outstanding features of it and playing it up. He could have put a corking headline on it, too; like "Holman's Victor in One Man Game." But he missed it entirely, the dumb-bell. Of course I'm not pretending that I was on to it myself just at the moment. It was Newt Lewis who put me on. But I'm no news hound. If I was I'll bet I'd turn out better stuff than some of these reporter guys do. It seems like some of them don't know a football from a Dutch cheese!

I suppose the story of that game really began on Thursday night, when Babe and I were in our room in Puffer and this

Joe Kenton mooned in on us. Babe's real name is Gordon Fairfield Linder, but he's always been called Babe, even when he was in grammar school, on account of him being so big. Babe played center on the team, and I played right tackle. This fellow Joe Kenton was a sort of fourth substitute half-back. He'd been hanging on to the squad all the season. He wasn't much good, it seemed, and the only reason he was still with us was because Hop MacLean, who was captain that year and played left half, had a bum knee and was expected to have to give up playing any old time. He'd got injured in the first game of the year, but he was still playing, and playing a mighty nice game, and I guess Joe would have been dropped from the squad after last week's game if Rusty hadn't probably forgotten about him. A coach gets sort of muddle-headed in the last two weeks of the season, and sort of absent-minded, too, and I guess he was so used to seeing Joe sitting there on the bench that he didn't think much about him: just thought he was part of the scenery.

Joe was an awfully decent sort of chap, even if he was a dub at football, and fellows liked him pretty well, Babe and me inclusive. He was a corking baseball player, and you might think he'd have been satisfied with that, but he wasn't. He was dead set on being a football hero, and he'd been trying last year and this without getting very far. It wasn't anything unusual for him to turn up at Number 11, but he didn't generally come in looking like he was rehearsing to be a pallbearer at some one's funeral. Babe, who had grabbed up a Latin book, thinking it might be one of the faculty, tossed it back on the table and picked up his magazine again and grunted "'Lo, Joe." And I said "'Lo," too, and asked who was dead; and Joe sort of groaned and dropped into a chair.

“I’m up against it, fellows,” he said dismally.

“Spill it,” said I.

He pulled a letter out of a pocket and tossed it to me.

“Read it,” said he.

So I pulled the thing out of the envelope and started. It was dated “Central City, Nov. 12.” Central City is where Joe lives.

MY DEAR JOSEPH, [it began] your last Sunday’s letter, posted, I see, on Tuesday, has just arrived, and both your mother and I are glad to learn that you are well and getting on finely. You neglect to answer the questions I asked in my last letter, but as you never do answer my questions I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I am pleased that you are doing so well at football, of course, but would like sometimes to have you make even passing mention of your studies. Your mother has been suffering for several days with a slight cold, but is considerably better today and—

“It’s on the next page,” interrupted Joe dolefully. “Turn over.”

So I turned the page and read—“on top of the furnace, and it’s a wonder she wasn’t burned.”

“Eh?” said Babe, looking up. “Joe’s mother?”

I chuckled, but Joe was too depressed to even smile. “The cat,” he said. “Go on. It’s further along. Where it begins

‘Now for our news.’”

Now for our news [I went on]. Your Uncle Preston has just bought him a new car and he called up this morning and suggested that we might run over to the School Saturday in time for the football game. Seems to me it’s quite a ways to go, nigh eighty miles, but your Uncle says we can do it in two hours and a half, and your mother’s willing and so I guess you’re likely to see us around one o’clock if Preston doesn’t run us into a telegraph pole or something, like he did his old car. We are aiming to get there in time to visit with you a little before you go to play football. I hope you will do your best Saturday, son, for your mother’s been telling your Uncle and Aunt Em some pretty tall yarns about your football playing, not knowing very much about it, of course, and I guess they’ll be downright disappointed if you don’t win that game. Anne Walling was up to the house Sunday—

“That’s all,” groaned Joe, and reached for the letter.

“Well,” said I, “what’s the big idea? Why the forlorn countenance? Don’t you want to see your folks, or what?”

“No,” said Joe. “I mean yes, of course I do! Only, don’t you see, you big boob, what a mess I’m in? They’re expecting me to play, aren’t they? And I won’t play, will I? How am I going to explain it to them? Why, they think—”

Joe stopped.

“You’ve been lying to ’em,” grunted Babe.

“Honest, I haven’t Babe,” cried Joe. “I’ve never told them a thing that wasn’t so, but—well, you know how it is! A fellow’s folks are like that. They just get it into their heads that he’s a wonder, and—and jump at conclusions. Of course, I did say that I was on the team—”

“That was a whopper, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“No! I *am* on the team. I’m one of the squad, Gus. When you’re on the squad you’re on the team, aren’t you?”

“Not necessarily. Last month there were more than eighty fellows on the squad, old son. Mean to tell me that they were all on the team?”

“Different now,” growled Babe. “Only twenty-six. The kid’s right, Gus. Shut up.”

“Maybe,” went on Joe uncomfortably, “when I’d write home about the games I’d sort of let them think I—I had more to do with them than I had.”

“Maybe,” said I, “seeing that you’ve only played in one, and then for about ten minutes!”

“Two,” said Joe, indignantly. “And I played all through one quarter in the Glenwood game!”

“Well, I guess it’s up to you to climb down, son, and tell your folks you ain’t the glaring wonder they think you are.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Joe, but he didn’t sound like he meant it. “I thought of getting sick, so I could go to the infirmary, but I guess it’s too late to develop anything now. If I’d got this letter yesterday——”

“Don’t be an ass,” advised Babe gruffly. “Spunk up and tell ’em the truth. No disgrace. Lots of fellows can’t play football. Look at Gus.”

“Huh, you big elephant,” said I, “if I couldn’t play the old game better than you ever dreamed of playing it——”

“Gee, I hate to ’fess up,” groaned Joe. “I’ll look such an ass, Babe!”

Babe looked across suspiciously, and grunted. “Any one coming with your folks, kid?” he asked.

Joe nodded and reddened. “They’re bringing along a girl I know.”

“Huh! So that’s it, eh? Thought you weren’t telling the whole of it. The girl thinks you’re a bloomin’ hero, of course. You’ve been filling her up with yarns about how you were the whole team, and how you won last year’s game with Munson alone and unassisted, and——”

“Oh, shut up,” begged Joe. “I never did! But you know what girls are, Babe. Have a heart!”

Babe looked flattered, and positively simpered, the big goof! You couldn’t get him within half a block of a girl if you tried! He scowled and pretended he didn’t know what I was laughing about, and said: “Well, you might bandage a leg or an arm, Joe, and make believe you’d busted it.”

But Joe shook his head. “They’d ask about it and I’d have to lie,” he said virtuously. “I thought of that, too. I’ve thought of about everything, I guess, and nothing’s any good—except ——”

He stopped and sort of choked. “’Cept what?” asked Babe.

“Well—” Joe hesitated, gulped and blurted it out finally. “I was thinking that maybe, seeing that no one cares much whether we beat Mills or not, I was thinking that maybe if you fellows spoke to Rusty he might let me play for a while!”

“You have some swell thinks,” said I.

Babe didn’t say anything for a moment. Just sat there hunched up in his chair like a heathen idol. Finally he said, sort of thoughtful: “Rusty won’t be here Saturday.”

“You could speak to him to-morrow,” said Joe eagerly.

Babe went on like he hadn’t heard him. “He and Hop and Danny and Slim are going to Hawleyville to see Munson play. Newt Lewis’ll be in charge on the side line and Pete Swanson or Gus here will be field captain, I guess. Of course, Rusty will say what the line-up’s to be, but if one of the fellows was taken out, say, after the first half, it would be up to Newt to pick a sub. If I was you, Joe, I’d wait until Saturday.”

“But I don’t believe Newt would put me in,” objected Joe sadly. “There’s Hearn and Torrey—”

“Torrey’ll be playing in the first line-up, in Hop’s place,” said Babe calmly. “There’ll be you and Hearn and Jimmy Sawyer. Now if it happens that Hop leaves Gus here temporary captain, and Gus says a good word for you—”

“Say,” I interrupted, “what do you think I am? I’d like to help Joe out of his hole, of course, but you know mighty well he can’t play half-back like Bob Hearn! It’s all right to say that the Mills game is unimportant, but you know pesky well we want to win it, and Rusty wants us to. Besides, Munson

licked them ten to nothing two weeks back, and we don't want to do any worse than that, do we? No, sir, you can count me out! I'll stand by my friends, Babe, but I'm not going to risk the old ball game that way!"

"No one's asking you to risk anything," answered Babe, yawning like he was going to swallow his foot. "You know well enough we can put it all over that Mills outfit. If we couldn't we'd have a swell chance to beat Munson! They've lost that good full-back they had when Munson played 'em, Gus."

"But the guy that's playing the position now is nearly as good," I objected.

"Don't believe it. He couldn't be. Shut up and let your betters talk. I guess we can pull it off, Joe. Don't you worry, kid. Just leave it to Gus and me. Only, for the love of little limes, if you do get in Saturday don't mix your signals the way you did yesterday in practice!"

"I won't," said Joe, earnest and grateful. "Honest, fellows, if you'll let me in for the second half—"

"Hold on!" said Babe. "That's a big order, kid. I didn't say anything about getting you in for a whole half. Be reasonable!"

"Yes, but don't you see, Babe, if I get in at the start of the last half I can explain—I mean the folks'll think I'm being saved for the Munson game the week after, but if I only play for a quarter, say, they'll get on to the whole gag!"

"Kid, you're a wonder," said Babe admiringly. "All right, we'll do the best we can. Mind you keep this to yourself, though. No talking!"

Joe agreed and was so grateful and relieved that he tried to make a speech from the doorway, but Babe shut him up. Just as he was closing the door, though, Babe called after him. “Say, Joe,” he asked, “have you got a photograph of the dame?”

Joe said he hadn’t, and went on out.

CHAPTER X

GUS BILLINGS CONCLUDES

The Coach and Captain Hop MacLean and Danny Lord, who was first-string quarterback, and Slim Porter went off to Hawleyville early Saturday morning to see Munson play Kernwood and maybe get a line on her. Before he went Rusty told me I was to captain the team that afternoon.

“The manager will look after things off the field, Gus,” he said, “and Thompson will play quarter. He knows what plays to use, so you’d better let him run things as much as possible. Munson will have some scouts here and we can’t afford to show our hand much. We’ll win if we can, but I’d rather we took a licking than show too much of our game. Do the best you can, Gus, and make your tackles good.”

Joe’s folks arrived just after dinner in a shiny new car. Babe and I saw them from our window. That is, Babe saw them and I got a couple of peeks over his shoulder. He’d been sitting at the window for half an hour. The car stopped almost underneath and he nearly fell out, rubbering. Joe had made me promise to meet them, and so I went down. Babe wouldn’t, of course. You can’t steer him against a girl to save your life. Well, I haven’t much use for them either, but a chap’s got to be courteous. Joe introduced me all around and we set out to see the buildings, me walking with Aunt Emily and the girl. She was a right pretty girl, but sort of shy, and didn’t have much to say. Sort of small-town, you know. Wore her hair old-fashioned so you could see her ears plain. The

aunt was a pleasant old dame and she and I got on swimming. Once she said:

“Joseph tells me that you play on the football team, too, Mr. Billings,” and I said, “Yes’m, I get to play now and then.” “Well,” she said, smiling pleasantly, “we shall expect great things from you both to-day.”

We steered them up to Joe’s room in Routledge after a bit, and pretty soon Joe’s roommate, Hal Norwin, came in and I beat it. Mr. Morris seemed to think that Joe ought to go and get ready to play, too, but I explained that he didn’t have to hurry because he wouldn’t get in until the second half. “You see,” I said, “we’re sort of saving him, Mr. Morris. If anything happened to Joe to-day we’d be in a pretty bad way next Saturday, wouldn’t we?” Then I winked at Hal, who was looking sort of surprised, and pulled my freight.

It didn’t take us long to find that Munson wasn’t losing any tricks. Tom Meadows pointed out three of her fellows in the visitors’ stand just before the game started. “That biggest guy is Townsend, their left guard, and—”

“You don’t have to tell me,” said I. “I’ve played against him. And the little fellow in the striped shirt is Quinn, the quarter, and the other goof is Taylor, the only back that made any gains against us last year. Well, I guess they won’t learn much here to-day, Tom.”

We don’t charge for any of the games except the big game with Munson, and so we usually draw pretty fair-sized crowds. Warrensburg folks are mighty keen for anything they don’t have to pay for. So we had the stands pretty well filled that afternoon by the time Mills kicked off, and the other

fellows had fetched along maybe a hundred and fifty rooters who made an awful lot of noise when young Thompson juggled the ball almost under our goal and gave me heart failure for a moment. He managed to hold on to it finally, though, and we soon kicked out of there, and the old game settled down to a see-saw that didn't get either team anything but hard knocks.

We weren't looking for a very good game, even with three of our first-string players out of the line-up, for Mills wasn't very heavy and had lost more than half her games that year, but I'm here to say that she sprung a surprise on us for fair that afternoon. For one thing, she was so blamed quick that she found us napping time and again; and she had a new variation of a fake forward pass that fooled us finely until we got on to it. By the time we were hep to it she had thrown a full-sized scare into us and worked the ball down into our twenty-five yard line. But that was in the second quarter. The first quarter didn't show either team up much. We both punted a good bit and tried the other fellow out and looked for a lucky break that didn't come. It wasn't until that second period began that Mills got down to work and had us worried for a while. She got two short runs away around our left end, where Slim Porter's absence was sorely felt, as they say, and then pulled a lucky forward that made it first down on our thirty-four. Then she stabbed at Babe and lost a yard. Then that bean-pole of a full-back of hers worked that fake forward for the second time, and made it go for ten yards, coming right through between me and Conly when we weren't looking for anything of the sort. I got a nice wallop in the face in that play and had to call for time and get patched up.

After that, Mills got a yard outside Means, who was playing in Slim's place at left tackle, and made it first down on our twenty-five. I read the riot act then, though not being able to talk very well on account of having one side of my mouth pasted up with plaster, and we held her for two downs. I guess she might have scored if she had tried a field goal, but she was set on a touchdown and went after it with a short heave over the center of the line that Thompson couldn't have missed if he had tried. I felt a lot better after that, and in two plays we had the old pigskin back near the middle of the field. Then Pete Swanson gummed things up by falling over his big feet and we had to punt. Just before half-time we worked down to Mills' twenty-seven and after Brill had been stopped on a skin tackle play Pete went back and tried a drop kick. He missed the goal by not less than six yards, the big Swede! That about ended the half, and when we got over to the locker room in the gymnasium we knew we'd been playing football! We were a sore crowd, and Newt Lewis didn't make us feel any better by telling us how rotten we'd been. He kept it up until Babe told him to shut up or he'd bust him and I said "Hear! Hear!" out of one side of my mouth. Everybody was sore at everybody else. Thompson had the nerve to tell me I'd interfered with his business of running the team and I told him where he got off. Brill was mad because Thompson hadn't let him try that goal instead of Pete Swanson, and Pete was sore because he had failed. I guess about the only fellows there who weren't nursing grouches were the subs who hadn't got in, and amongst them was Joe in nice clean togs, looking anxious and making signs to me and Babe.

Well, we'd fixed it all right for him before the game. Babe was so blamed stubborn and insistent that I had to agree to his frame-up in self-defense and so I told Newt about Joe's folks being there and how he wanted to bask in the spot-light on account of them and that girl and how it was my opinion that he hadn't ever been given a fair chance and was every bit as good as Hearn or Sawyer. It seemed that Rusty had instructed Newt to use all the subs he could in the last half and so Newt didn't put up any holler about Joe. And when we went back again there was our young hero at left half, in place of Torrey, looking nervous but determined. I could see his folks in the school stand, the girl in a blue dress, and his Uncle Preston's black mustaches standing out six inches on each side of his face.

We had six second- or third-string fellows in our line-up when the third quarter began, and I was plumb certain we had our work cut out for us if we were going to win the old ball game. Mills came back at us mighty savage after the kick-off and had things her own way until we took a brace and made her punt. We sort of got together then and worked the ends and a long forward pass and made her thirty-one. Then we got penalized for holding and finally had to punt and Brill sent the ball over the line. Play sort of see-sawed again for a while, with Mills having slightly the better of the kicking game, and then the first score came, and came unexpected.

Joe had been holding his end up pretty well, partly because I'd tipped Thompson off to go light on him, and he'd made a couple of yards for us once or twice. Well, pretty soon Mills had to punt from around her forty-five and Thompson went back up the field, taking Joe with him. Torrey had been

taking punts and Joe had taken Torrey's place and so Thompson calls him back without thinking much about it. The punt went sort of askew and landed in the corner of the field. Joe didn't judge it for beans and it hit about on the fifteen yards and went up again with him grabbing for it. He missed it but got it near the five-yard line, and by that time a red-headed end named Brennan was right on top of him. I don't know how Brennan got there so quick but there he was. Of course, if Joe had thought he'd have let the old ball alone, but he didn't. He grabbed it, juggled it a bit and froze on to it just as this red-headed Mills right end came up. Then he started to run. By that time there was a mob on the scene and I couldn't see just what happened. But when it was all over there was Joe a yard behind our goal line with the ball still hugged tight and Bert Naylor was putting a big white 2 on the score board where it said "Opponent." Joe had scored a safety!

I started to bust into the poor boob, but he looked so unhappy I didn't have the heart to say much. I just told him he had probably lost the game for us and a few things like that, and let it go. He certainly did look sick over it.

The Mills rooters went crazy and howled like a lot of red Indians and we went back to the job, pretty well determined now to make the fur fly and get a score. The quarter ended pretty soon after Joe had scored for the enemy and we changed goals. Newt threw in a couple more subs, the silly jay, and I expected he'd sink Joe, but he didn't. If we could have opened up on those fresh Mills guys and used a few of our scoring plays we could have licked them quick enough, I guess, but Thompson had his orders from Rusty not to show anything and nothing I could say would move him. Just the

same, we got going pretty well in that last period and ate our way down to the enemy's nineteen yards only to have a sub that Newt had stuck in for Pete Swanson boot the game away by a perfectly inexcusable fumble that Mills captured. Newt had a brain storm then and sent Bentley in to take my place, and although I offered to punch him full of holes if he didn't get off the field and told him I was captain the umpire butted in and I had to beat it. So I saw the rest of the game from the bench, and didn't mind it much after Newt pulled Babe out two plays later. Babe was so mad that I felt a lot better.

Mills was just playing for time now, willing to quit any moment seeing she was two points to the good and had us beat if only the whistle would blow. But there was still one kick left in the old team, even if it was mostly subs by now, and when there was something like four minutes left Thompson got off a corking forward pass to left end that landed the ball on Mills' forty-two yards. Another attempt at the same stunt grounded, and Brill, pretty near the only first-string man left, snaked through for four yards and made it third down on the thirty-eight. The stands had sort of quieted down now and I could hear Thompson's signals plain. They called for a cross-buck by right half, and when the starting number came I saw Thompson grab the ball, swing around half a turn and hold it forward. Then everything went wrong. That idiot Joe Kenton had got his signals twisted again! He beat the other half to the ball by inches, grabbed it from Thompson and shot through outside guard. I guess there's a special luck for fools, for Joe found a hole as wide as the Mississippi River, and the first thing I knew he was side-stepping one back, giving the straight arm to another and twisting right through the whole outfit!

Well, there's no use making a long story any longer. Joe had speed, if he didn't know much football. Baseball had taught him that; and it had taught him to be quick on the getaway, too, and it was quickness on the getaway that got him through the Mills' lines. After that the quarter was the only thing between him and the goal. I guess there wasn't one of the Mills bunch that could have run him down from behind. That quarter tried to get Joe near the twenty-yard line, but it looked to me like he was too certain, for Joe sort of skidded on one foot, twisted his body and was off on the other foot, and I don't believe the quarter even touched him. Two long-legged Mills guys chased him over the line, squarely between the posts, but it wasn't until Joe was lying on the ball that they reached him.

After the ball was brought out Brill tried to make those six points into seven, but he missed the goal worse than Pete Swanson had. No one cared much for 6 to 2 was good enough, and after Mills had kicked off again and we had piled into their line a couple of times the game was over.

I happened to be in front of Routledge about half an hour later, when Joe's folks were getting ready to go home, and I could see that Joe had made an awful hit with the whole bunch. Old man Morris was as proud as anything, and so was Joe's mother, while that uncle of his, with his trick mustaches, was so haughty that he bumped his head getting into the car. I guess the girl was tickled, too, but you couldn't tell by her looks. Joe was mighty modest, too, I'll say that for him. You wouldn't have guessed he was a hero, just by looking at him. I helped Aunty into the car, and she smiled and thanked me and said, as she shook hands: "I think you

did just beautifully, Mr. Billings, but wasn't Joseph wonderful?"

"Wonderful," I said without cracking a smile, "isn't the word for it!"

When Rusty got back and heard about the game he looked sort of disgusted, and then he laughed and finally he looked surprised. "Kenton?" he said, frowning. "How come, Newt? We dropped Kenton two weeks ago!"

"No, you didn't, Coach," said Newt. "Maybe you meant to, but you didn't."

"That so? Must have forgot it then. H-m. Well, it looks like it was a fortunate thing I did forget it, seeing Kenton was the only one of you with enough pep to make a score!"

That evening we were talking it over in Number 11, four or five of us. Joe didn't show up, being so modest, I suppose. Finally Newt said: "Well, we can laugh all we want to, but we've got to hand it to Joe Kenton for one thing. He's the only fellow I ever heard of who played in a football game, in which both sides scored, and made all the points!"

When the Munson game was over, all but forty seconds of it, and we had them beaten, 19 to 7, Rusty beckoned Joe from the bench. "Kenton," he said, "I'm going to put you in so you can get your letter. Go on in at right half, son, but—listen here—no matter what happens *don't you touch that ball!*"

CHAPTER XI

CAMP RESTHERE

Three boys descended from the afternoon train, dragging after them duffle bags, blanket rolls and bundles until, as the four-car train took up its slow and seemingly painful journey again, they were fairly surrounded. The half dozen witnesses of the exciting event surveyed the three arrivals silently, unblinkingly for a space and then returned to the interrupted routines of their lives, dispersing at various angles across the snowy expanse that represented North Pemberton's principal business street. Leaving his companions on guard Hal Norwin followed, directing his steps toward a rambling white building with blue doors and window frames bearing the faded legend "Timkins' Livery Stable." The agent disappeared into the station, closing the waiting room door behind him with a most inhospitable-sounding *bang*. Bert Madden yawned and then settled his chin more snugly into the upturned collar of his mackinaw.

"Nice lively sort of a dump," he observed.

Joe Kenton smiled. "How far is it to the camp, Bert?" he asked. The sudden jangling of sleigh bells broke the silence and both boys turned toward the stable. A man in an old bearskin coat was leading a horse through the doorway and Hal was holding up the shafts of a double sleigh.

"Eight miles, I think he said," answered Bert. "Gee, we'll never get all this truck in that sleigh!"

But they did, and themselves and the driver as well, and ten minutes later they were jingle-jangling along the narrow road, the runners creaking on the firm snow, leaving North Pemberton behind. The old blankets and fur robes under which the boys nestled were warm enough for a much colder day, and the bags and bundles, piled about them, added to the warmth. The sun was setting beyond Little Rat and Big Rat Mountains, and the western sky was aglow. Presently, climbing the slight grade between Little Rat and Marble Mountains, they crossed a rude bridge, under which a stream gurgled beneath a canopy of ice.

“Is that Rat Brook?” asked Hal.

“Glover’s,” answered the driver. He pointed his whip to the left. “Rat’s over there about a mile or so. Glover’s comes out of it further along.”

“Oh, yes,” assented Hal, his voice muffled by the flap of his collar, “I remember now. Rat Brook crossed the other road, the one toward Burton.” The driver nodded, spoke to the horse and flicked his whip harmlessly. “I should think,” pursued Hal, “that the other road would be the shortest.”

“Yep, about a mile, but this road’s easier. Too many hills that way. Only one on this road, and that’s just behind us. Get ap, Judy!”

Coming around the northern shoulder of Little Rat, they found the sunset gone and the long purple shadows of evening stalking across the floor of the little valley. Big Rat loomed beyond, wooded and dark. Hal pointed westward. “Old Forge Pond’s over there,” he said. The boys in the back seat looked, but there was nothing to see save a rather flat

forest of new growth maples and oaks and birches. Then, suddenly, as they turned on the winding road, a streak of tarnished silver met their gaze for an instant and was swiftly swallowed up by the trees.

“That was Rat Brook,” Hal informed them. “If we followed it we’d come out at the lower end of the pond. It wouldn’t be more than three miles, I guess.”

“Thanks,” said Bert, “I’m quite comfy as I am. There’s only one thing troubling me, Hal. When do we eat?”

“Just as soon as we can,” laughed Hal. “We’ll get there in about three quarters of an hour, I guess.” He looked to the driver for confirmation, but the furwrapped figure failed to commit himself. “Then we’ll fix up a bit and Joe can start supper.”

“Me!” exclaimed Joe startledly. “Gee, Hal, I can’t cook!”

Hal chuckled. “Well,” came from the front seat, “you’ll be able to do all the cooking we’ll need to-night, Joe. I guess some cold grub, with a cup of hot tea, will answer.”

There was a faint groan of protest from Bert, but Joe relaxed again, relieved. They came to a corner and turned left on a broader and more traveled road. “Turnpike,” announced the driver. “Lineville about nine miles.” He flicked his whip northward. Then, after awhile, the woods on their left gave way to meadow and Hal shouted: “There she is!” And there she was, indeed, “she” being a curving, mile-long expanse of frozen lake, nestling under the upreaching slope of Little Rat. Here and there along the further shore small camps nestled under snow-powdered pines or leafless hardwood, four or five in all, deserted, every one. There had been several snow-

falls up here in the hills already—to-day was the twenty-seventh of December—but they had been light, and the surface of the lake had been swept clean by the wind after each flurry. The driver said he guessed there was a good four inches of ice there, and the boys rejoiced.

“Great,” said Bert. “That’s more than enough to skate on and we won’t have to cut through much to fish.”

“You aimin’ to fish?” inquired the driver. There was a tolerant note in his voice that caused Hal to assume that he thought they’d be wasting their time. But no, he guessed they’d catch some pickerel if they were lucky. “I couldn’t ever see any fun in freezin’ my feet that way, though,” he added.

“Well, it is rather cold weather,” laughed Hal, “but if we build a good fire on shore it’s not so bad.”

The driver grunted doubtfully and the sleigh swung from the turnpike into a narrow lane that wound between pine and spruce. The branches sometimes flicked their faces and spattered dry snow about them. The lake came into sight again close beside them, its darkening surface seeming now like a great sheet of shimmering metal. Then the jingling bells ceased and there, in a small clearing, stood the camp, its modest bulk silhouetted against the ice. A rustic sign overhung a little path that led down to the cabin, and on it the word RESTHERE was printed.

Followed a busy five minutes during which the bags and rolls and packages were carried to the cabin and the driver accepted his modest fee of three dollars, promised faithfully to return for them four days later and climbed back to his

seat. There, having pulled three of the robes about him and gathered his reins in hand, he paused to cast a dubious look about the twilight surroundings.

“Mean to stay here all alone?” he asked.

“Sure,” agreed Hal.

“H-m,” said the man. “Well, every fellow to his taste. Too blamed lonesome to suit me, though. Good evenin’. Get ap, Judy!”

The cabin was of boards and battens and weather tight. There was one good-sized room for all purposes save cooking. The kitchen—a kitchenette Bert called it—was tacked on behind. It was just big enough for the stove, the wood box, and the cupboard and a wide shelf along one side that served as a table. The cabin held everything they needed for their four-day sojourn, save food, and that they had brought along in generous quantities. Cot beds, plenty of woolen blankets, kitchen utensils, stoneware dishes, even reading matter in the shape of magazines several months old awaited them. There was a small fire place and, outside, a rampart like pile of cordwood, chestnut, hickory and birch. Hal viewed its snug comfort with a proud proprietary air, while Bert, his hands in the pockets of his capacious knickers, opined that it was “one swell joint,” and Joe, who had never so much as seen a camp before, was reduced to an almost awed admiration.

They “made camp,” as Hal phrased it, and then set about getting supper. There was a pump outside the kitchen door, but it failed, of course, to work, and Bert went off with a pail and a hatchet to get water from the pond. Hal filled the wood

box beside the stove and piled fagots in the fireplace while Joe tore the wrappings from the groceries and set out the tea and bread and strawberry jam and potted tongue and butter. Presently the fire was crackling merrily in the stove, Bert came back with the water, blowing on numbed fingers, and Hal unearthed the can opener from the knife box in the cupboard. A quarter of an hour later they were seated around the table in the big room with the hickory and birch logs snapping and blazing beside them. Everything tasted better than it had ever tasted before in any one's recollection, and Joe made two trips to the kitchen for more bread. Dish washing fell to the lot of Bert, and Hal wiped. Joe drew a canvas chair to the fire, stretched out tired limbs and was nearly asleep when the others finished. Bert wanted to put his skates on and try the ice, and Hal after protesting that it was too dark to have any fun, unenthusiastically agreed to accompany him, but nothing came of it. An early rising, a tiresome journey, the long drive in the cold air and, now, the lulling warmth of the fire were too much for them. Joe went to sleep and snored frankly. Long before nine they were all in bed and hard at it.

They were up before eight, which, used as they all were to being called, coaxed and threatened into wakefulness, was doing pretty well. Breakfast over they donned skates and went out on the lake. It was a gorgeous morning, with a blue sky and golden sunlight. The air was cold but dry, and, while the thermometer which Hal had hung out overnight proclaimed the temperature to be eighteen above, they seemed scarcely to need the heavy clothing they had put on. Bert was an excellent skater, and Hal was almost as good. Hal, indeed, had won several prizes for speed skating. Bert's

inclination ran more to fancy “stunts” and tricks, and this morning he fairly outdid himself. Joe, a mere beginner and a most unpromising one, moved diffidently about and watched, at once admiring and envious. Presently they set out together to follow the shore and explore. It wasn’t long before Joe had fallen behind, but he was fairly content with his progress since, at least, he had managed to keep on his feet; and that was something of a triumph for Joe! He caught up with them when they stopped to climb ashore and investigate the first of the neighboring camps, and lost them again beyond the turn of the lake. They shouted laughing encouragement to him now and then, but they didn’t wait for him, and he came on them next when they rested on the edge of the little bridge that carried the pond road across the mouth of Rat Brook. Old Forge Pond was fed by springs and by dozens of trickling rills that wound down from the encompassing hills, but it had only one outlet, and that was Rat Brook. It, too, was frozen solid on top, although by listening intently they could hear the soft rippling and gurgling of the water beneath. It was about twelve feet broad at its widest and flowed off eastward between birch and alder and witch-hazel to North Pemberton and, eventually, the Chicontomoc River.

“It would be sort of fun to skate down the brook,” suggested Bert. “How far could you go, do you think?”

“Most to North Pemberton, I guess,” said Hal. “There isn’t much fall to it. Maybe you’d have to walk around here and there, though. We’ll try it some time, eh?”

Joe wasn’t nearly rested when they started on, but he dropped from the bridge heroically and went, too, trying his best to copy Hal’s easy motions and to keep his strokes long.

He thought he was doing pretty well, too, but pride goeth before a fall, and suddenly the ice rose up and smote him heavily and complacency was swiftly jarred out of him. The others, well ahead, waved consoling hands, but didn't stop. They were used to seeing Joe tumble. When he picked himself up he no longer tried to emulate Hal, but continued in his own safer, if less attractive style, reaching the camp some time after the others, rather tired but suffering from no further contusions.

They chopped holes through the ice a little later and rigged their lines, not without difficulty. By that time their thoughts turned toward food and the fishing operations were postponed until afternoon. Then, with a good fire burning on the shore, they baited their hooks and sat down to watch the tiny wisps of cloth, which, torn from an old red tablecloth, shone bravely in the afternoon sunlight. They sat there nearly an hour before any of the three flags showed signs of life. Then Hal's jerked upward and Hal, scrambling to his feet, skated swiftly toward it, so swiftly, in fact, that he over-skated the hole. But he landed a fair-sized pickerel and was proudly displaying the agitated fish when Joe gave a shrill yell and went plunging, floundering, arms waving, to where, further up the lake his particular little red flag was threatening to follow the line under the ice. The others, watching, whooped with glee at Joe's antics and roared when, losing his balance at last, he crashed to the ice and arrived at the hole on the seat of his knickers! He, too, captured his trophy, which, on comparison, was found to be a half inch longer than Hal's, although Hal did his utmost to stretch his pickerel enough to offset the difference. At dusk they had five fish. Hal had caught two, Joe had caught two

and Bert one. But Bert's was so much larger that there couldn't be any discussion. It measured just seventeen and five-eighths inches by the yard stick. Bert was very insistent on the five-eighths! Both he and Joe disclaimed any knowledge of the gentle art of cleaning fish, and so that duty fell to Hal. Supper that night was wonderful, for fried pickerel—even if not dipped in crumbs, and these weren't—are delicious at any time and doubly so when you have caught them yourself.

CHAPTER XII

UNINVITED GUESTS

Another night of deep, restful sleep followed, and in the morning they woke to find that it had snowed a good two inches already and was still at it. There was enough wind, however, to clear the ice in places, and they went skating again. A block of wood and three sticks gave them an hour's fun at shinny, during which Joe fell down on an average of once a minute and occasioned no end of amusement for his companions. He limped noticeably while getting dinner and, during that meal, paused frequently to place a gentle inquiring hand on various surfaces. Later they tried fishing again, the snow, now coming down in larger flakes and in a more desultory fashion, adding to the enjoyment. Perhaps the pickerel disliked being out in a snowstorm, for the boys sat around the fire a long while, talking and listening to the hiss of the flakes against the embers, without interruption until there came a faint hail from across the lake and they descried dimly a horse and sleigh outlined against the snowy bank beyond the distant turnpike and the figure of a man standing at the edge of the ice.

“Better go and see what he wants,” said Bert, and they skated over. The man on the shore was a big, burly, red-faced individual, in a rough brown ulster and a peaked cloth cap. A second man remained in the sleigh beyond.

“You boys been around here long?” asked the man gruffly.

“Since day before yesterday,” replied Bert. “We’re staying at Mr. Norwin’s camp over there in the cove.”

The man rolled the remains of an unlighted cigar between his lips while his eyes, small but very bright and keen, ranged over the lads. Then: “Seen any one else around here this morning?” he asked.

“No, sir, not a soul,” Bert assured him.

The man’s gaze roamed across the lake and he nodded toward the deserted cabins there. “Ain’t seen any one around any of those camps?”

“No, they’re closed up tight. We were around there yesterday.”

“Ain’t been around to-day, though, have you?”

“No, sir, not yet.”

The man nodded. “Guess I’d better take a look,” he said more to himself than to them. “My name’s Collins,” he added then. “I’m Sheriff down to Pemberton. A couple of thugs walked into Robbins’s hardware store at North Pemberton last night about nine o’clock and got away with three hundred and sixty-eight dollars in money and two Liberty Bonds. Old man Robbins was working on his books and had his safe open. They cracked him over the head and almost did for the old fellow.” To his hearers it seemed that Mr. Sheriff Collins dwelt almost lovingly on the latter portion of his narrative.

“That—that was too bad,” said Hal, rather lamely.

Mr. Collins grunted. “Guess he’ll pull through, though he’s pretty old to get bumped like he did. Well, you fellows

keep your eyes open and if you see any suspicious characters around get in touch with my office right away, understand. They might show up here. You can't tell. Last night's snow came along pretty lucky for 'em, covering up their foot-prints like it did. Guess if it hadn't been for the snow I'd have caught 'em before this."

"Yes, sir," said Bert, "we'll keep a lookout. Only I don't just see," he added dubiously, "how we could let you know if we did see them. I don't suppose there's any telephone around here, is there?"

The Sheriff pursed his lips and studied the stub of cigar, which he removed for the purpose. "Guess that's so, too," he acknowledged. "There's a 'phone at Old Forge, but that's pretty nigh six miles. And there's one at Lincoln's, up—no, there ain't neither. He had it taken out last summer 'cause the city folks was always runnin' in there to ring up Boston or New York or some place and always forgettin' to pay for it. Well, there's telephones down to North Pemberton, anyway, and—"

"How far would that be?" asked Bert innocently.

The Sheriff blinked. "'Bout eight or nine miles, maybe, by road: 'bout six if you take the trail."

Bert grinned. "I'm afraid the robbers would get away before we reached the telephone," he said.

"That's my lookout." Sheriff Collins spoke sternly. "It's your duty as a citizen to let me know just as soon as you can if those fellers turn up around here, and, mind, I'm holdin' you to it." He glared hard a moment, rolling his soggy

fragment of cigar in his mouth. Then he nodded, turned and scrambled back up the slope to where the sleigh awaited.

The boys skated back to the fire, replenished it and discussed the exciting event. The sound of sleigh bells coming ever nearer told them that Sheriff Collins was following the road around the lake to the empty cabins. Presently it passed behind them and became fainter. Joe looked thoughtfully along the curving shore. “You know,” he said, “those robbers might be around. We don’t know that they aren’t.”

Bert sniffed. “Pshaw,” he said, “they wouldn’t stay around here. They’d hike out for the city.”

Hal was thereupon prompted to tell just what he would do to throw the bloodhounds of the Law off his track in case he had committed a robbery, and then Bert indulged in a few theories, and thus a pleasant half hour passed, during which the Sheriff’s sleigh jingled back and past and out of hearing, presumably without the fugitives. Wearying of the subject under discussion, Joe presently arose and slid out on to the ice, where, thinking himself unobserved, he attempted a figure eight and promptly sat down. The resultant concussion was sufficient to attract the attention of the others, and Bert asked in a very disgusted voice:

“Gee, Joe, aren’t you *ever* going to learn to skate?”

“I don’t believe so,” replied Joe dolefully.

“Well, you never will until you *do* believe it,” said Hal decidedly. “You’ve got to have confidence, Joe. Just—just forget yourself a minute, you dumb-bell; forget that you’re skating and strike out as though you wanted to get

somewhere and didn't know you had skates on at all! Just—just let your skates do it!”

That may have been excellent advice, but Joe didn't act on it. Discouragedly he returned to the dying fire. Bert viewed him with disfavor.

“You're scared,” he said. “That's your main trouble. You're afraid you'll fall.”

“So would you be if you were black-and-blue all over,” replied Joe spiritedly. “I don't mind falling now and then; anyway, I ain't afraid; but I don't like to fall all the time!”

Hal laughed. “Why don't you try tying a pillow behind you, Joe?”

Joe echoed the laugh, though faintly. “I guess it would have to be a—what do you call it?—bolster!”

“We aren't going to get any fish to-day,” said Bert, “and I'm getting frozen. Let's pull up the lines and go in.” Hal agreed, and, when the lines were up, he and Bert started toward camp. “Aren't you coming, Joe?” Hal called.

“Not just yet,” Joe replied. “I guess I'll stay out and—and fall down awhile!”

The others went on, laughing, leaving Joe the sole occupant of the broad frozen surface. It had stopped snowing now, and there was a hint of color in the west that promised clearing. Joe started warily down the lake, keeping near the shore where the wind had freakishly swept the powdery snow from the ice and arranged it in long windrows whose shadowed hollows were purpling with the twilight. It was, he reflected, all well enough for Hal to tell him to have

confidence, but—here Joe’s arms described a windmill sweep in the air and he narrowly escaped a tumble—how could you have confidence when you just went off your feet every time you tried to skate faster than a walk? There was, though, a good deal of persistent courage in his make-up, and he kept on, rather more confident perhaps because he was safe from observation. He rounded the turn and could see, far ahead, the little bridge that spanned the outlet. As he floundered on, awkwardly but with grim determination, he passed the empty, shuttered cabins. They looked lonesome and eerie in the gathering shadows, and he recalled with a little nervous thrill the visit of the Sheriff and his mission.

Back in the camp, Hal aroused the smouldering fire in the chimney place and he and Bert, having removed their damp mackinaws and damper boots, drew chairs to the fire and sank luxuriously into them. “Funny about Joe,” observed Bert, after a silence. “You’d think a fellow as old as he is—sixteen, isn’t he?—would have learned to skate better.”

“That’s so,” Hal agreed. “He can do other things though.”

“Sure,” said Bert, grinning. “Like cooking.”

“Yes, and—say, Bert, I wonder if we’re putting it on him a bit. Making him do the cooking. Maybe we ought to take turns.”

“I don’t believe he minds,” answered the other, comfortably. “Besides, neither of us could do it, I guess. There he comes now. Let’s hope he hasn’t busted any of his arms or legs!”

But it wasn’t Joe who threw open the door and entered. It was a stranger. And it was a second stranger who entered on

his heels and closed the door behind him. They were an unattractive couple; one small, wiry, smirking; the other thickset, dark-visaged and scowling. They wore thick woolen sweaters under their jackets, but their shoes were thin and it wasn't difficult to surmise that when they continued their journey they would be more appropriately clad for the weather, and at the expense of the occupants of the camp. Neither of the boys had a moment's doubt as to the identity of the visitors. The Sheriff's story was too fresh in their minds. It was Hal who found his voice first and gave them a dubious "Hello!"

The men waived amenities, however, and the big one spoke. "Say, kids, we're hikin' down to Weston an' we're sort of up against it. Get me? We ain't had nothin' to eat since mornin' an' we're fair perishin'. We seen the smoke an' come over to see could we get a snack."

"Why, yes, we can give you something to eat," answered Hal, a trifle tremulously, "but we haven't started supper yet. If you want to wait—"

"Aw, where do you get that stuff?" interrupted the smaller man, thrusting forward to the fire and holding his hands to the warmth. "We ain't society folks, bo. We can eat any time!"

"Shut up, Slim," growled his companion. "Sure, we'll wait. Somethin' hot's what I'm cravin', an' not no cold hand-out."

"Say, listen—" began the other, but he stopped at a menacing scowl and only muttered, darting a nervous look toward a window. Bert and Hal had exchanged troubled

glances that had in some manner established the understanding that Hal was to do the talking and Bert was to take his cue from him. Hal pulled another chair to the hearth.

“Better get warm,” he suggested. “It—it’s sort of cold, isn’t it?” He seated himself on Bert’s cot, yielding his chair to the man called Slim.

“You said it,” agreed the bigger man almost amiably, as the chair creaked under his weight. “You guys live here all the time?”

“Oh, no, we’re just here for a few days. We’re from Central City.”

“Huh, must be sort of lonely.”

Hal agreed that it was, sort of. He was doing a good deal of thinking, a lot more than he was accustomed to, was Hal; and he was ready for the next question when it came.

“Guess you don’t have many visitors,” went on the man with assumed carelessness. “Bet you ain’t seen a stranger, before us, for days.”

Hal laughed with a fine imitation of amusement. “You lose, then. There was a man here just this afternoon; two of them, in fact.” He heard the smaller visitor draw his breath in sharply, but his amused look didn’t waver from the other man’s face. The latter narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“That so? Two of ’em, eh? What did they want?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” answered Hal carelessly. “Something about a robbery somewhere. Where’d he say it was, Bert?”

“Pemberton, wasn’t it?” asked Bert uninterestedly.

“Yes, I guess it was. One of the men said he was a sheriff. They didn’t stay long. Went around the lake and came out again and drove off toward Thompson.”

“Lookin’ for a robber, was he?” asked the big man calmly. “Well, say, I hope he catches him. There’s a heap too many yeggs round the country nowadays. Ain’t that so, Slim?” Slim agreed unenthusiastically that it was. Slim didn’t look, however, as though he enjoyed the subject. He sat on the edge of his chair and failed to share his companion’s apparent comfort. “Thompson’s about twelve miles, ain’t it?” continued the other idly.

“Thirteen, I think,” replied Hal. “Gee, I wouldn’t much care about chasing robbers this kind of weather. Bet that sheriff won’t get back to Pemberton before morning.”

“Ain’t that a shame?” commented the man. “Say, I ain’t meanin’ to butt in, sonny, but what about the eats? We got a fair ways to go yet. Get me? Lineville’s our next stop.”

“I’ll start supper right off,” said Hal. “Must be ’most time, anyway.” He raised his voice and spoke with surprising heartiness. Had the man been watching him just then, which he wasn’t, having transferred his gaze momentarily to the leaping flames, he might almost have thought that Hal was trying to make his tones carry beyond the further window on which his eyes were set. “I don’t know how good it’ll be, though, for, you see, the fellow that’s our regular cook has gone to North Pemberton, and I guess he won’t be back yet awhile. But I’ll do—”

“Eh?” exclaimed the big man startledly. “North Pemberton? What’s he gone there for?”

“We get our groceries there,” answered Hal, rising from the cot, stretching and moving aimlessly toward the front of the cabin. “It’s about eight miles, I guess, and he isn’t likely to get back for a couple of hours.” Hal stopped at one of the two windows and stared out. “Hope he don’t get lost coming back. It’s as black as my pocket to-night.”

It was black, if one excepted the lake. That was darkly gray, and the moving form close to the nearer shore was momentarily visible ere it melted into the shadows. Hal turned away from the window. “Well,” he announced cheerfully, “guess we might as well light up.”

CHAPTER XIII

DOWN THE BROOK

As it happened, Joe had been coming back along the shore when the two men had emerged from the woods at the left of the cabin. They had not, he was certain, seen him, for he had instinctively swerved behind a clump of brush. His instant suspicion had become certainty when, watching, he had seen the strangers peer cautiously about them before slinking hurriedly to the front door. When they had entered, Joe stood for a long minute, his thoughts racing. He visioned his friends robbed and beaten, perhaps murdered. His first, not unnatural, impulse, was toward flight, but it was brief, and after that he set himself to find a practical means of helping the others. Several more minutes went by and the twilight deepened. At last Joe approached the cabin, keeping to the shadows. The windows were warmly lighted by the flickering flames of the fire as he crept across the porch toward the nearer one, and he could hear the low murmur of voices; sometimes could distinguish a word. His first hurried glance over the sill brought a sigh of relief. The scene inside was reassuringly different from what he had feared to find. Yet he was sure that the elements of tragedy were there, and he was striving desperately to think of some plan to circumvent the intruders when, looking again, he found Hal's eyes on his. Then came Hal's voice, suddenly raised, in the words: "I don't know how good it'll be, though, for, you see, the fellow that's our regular cook has gone to North Pemberton, and I guess he won't be back yet awhile."

An instant later Joe was tottering cautiously over the frozen ground to the lake, his skates catching in hidden roots or colliding with snow-covered snags. Fortunately the distance was but a dozen rods, and he covered it without misadventure. Then he was skating along the deeper blackness of the margin, slowly that the sound of the steel blades on the ice might not be heard back at the cabin. And as he skated he thought hard. From the little he had seen and heard he had gathered a very correct idea of the situation back there. The robbers, who had doubtless been in hiding in the hills between North Pemberton and the lake since last night, had arrived at the cabin chilled and hungry. Doubtless they had demanded food and Hal had agreed to cook supper for them. Then he had happened to see the face at the window and had sent his message. "Hurry to North Pemberton and give the alarm," was the way Joe had construed it. "We'll keep them here as long as we can."

And now, past the curving point of the land, Joe set his thoughts on the far end of the lake and put every bit of effort into his swaying body. Just when the plan to follow Rat Brook on skates instead of seeking road or trail came to him he could not have told. It was there, suddenly, in his mind the moment he reached the turn of the shore. He no longer sought concealment nor smooth ice, but headed as straight as his sense of direction pointed. The farther shore leaped out at him from the darkness suddenly and he had to check his speed to duck under the little bridge. Then he was off again, the ice-roofed brook stretching ahead of him plainly discernible in the faint early radiance of the stars. His skates seemed to awake hollow echoes, but the ice was firm beneath its occasional crust or light blanket of snow. Rat Brook had

little current, so little that it froze almost as soon as the lake, and while the water moved sluggishly beneath the ice it did not weaken it. There was a straight stretch, like a canal, for nearly a quarter of a mile, and then the brook turned to the right, following the base of Little Rat Mountain, and after that curved continuously. Often the forest closed in on both sides and Joe must perforce trust to luck rather than to vision, yet save once or twice he held his course. Branches slashed at him, and now and then a protruding root or fallen tree strove to trip him. But somehow, in some instinctive fashion, he passed them all safely and without decreasing his speed. Had he stopped thinking of his errand long enough to consider that speed he would have been tremendously surprised, for he was skating just about twice as fast as he had ever skated in his life, and, moreover—which, if Hal was right, was possibly the reason for it—doing it without conscious thought!

The brook had been turning slowly to the right for some minutes when, reaching a clear stretch, Joe saw trouble ahead. The brook broadened where a second stream entered and a blacker path there told him that he was looking at open water. He might stop, with difficulty, and veer into the inhospitable arms of the trees and shrubs, or he might keep on, trusting to luck to find ice along the margin. He chose the latter. Then there was a gurgling and murmuring of water in his ears, a wide pool of moving water at his feet and the swift realization that for at least three yards the ice was gone from bank to bank!

He had frequently seen Bert leap over a fairly high obstruction set on the surface of the ice, such as a barrel or a low hurdle, and he had witnessed other fellows make broad-

jumps on skates, but how these feats had been accomplished he had no very clear notion. Nor had he time to consider the matter now, for almost as soon as he had sighted the crisis he was up to it. His heart did a little somersault about under his front collar button, as it seemed, and then he had brought his gliding skates together, had bent at the knees, had snapped his body straight again and was flying through air.

He landed in darkness, yet on a solid surface. His left foot, trailing, caught its skate point on the edge of the ice and brought him to his knees, but, by sweeping his arms wildly, he somehow kept his balance and somehow got both feet beneath him once more and again struck out. A moment later a sudden sharp bend found him unprepared and he had to spread his skates wide apart and throw his body hard to the right, and even so he almost came a cropper and only saved himself by a complete spin that must have looked more surprising than graceful. Yet that was the only time he really slowed down from lake to town, the town that scarcely a minute later shot its lights at him through the trees. Even the bridge failed to halt him, for there was headroom if one skated low, and after that the trees, and even the bushes, were gone and he was speeding through a flat meadow, with the church and houses of North Pemberton standing sharply against the winter sky ahead.

His journey by ice ended where a wagon bridge crossed the brook near where the town's one illuminated sign proclaimed "Telegraph and Telephone." He climbed the bridge abutment and floundered across the roadway. In the telegraph office a girl blinked startledly at the sound of his skates as he waddled from door to counter.

“I want to get the Sheriff’s office in Pemberton,” gasped Joe, his breath just about all gone now. “I—it’s important!”

The girl came to life quickly. “Sheriff’s office?” she asked briskly. “If you want the Sheriff he’s here at the Hotel. One block to your left!” The last sentence was in a higher voice, for Joe was already clanking through the doorway.

Camp Resthere’s uninvited guests did full justice to the meal that Hal finally set before them, the more so, doubtless, because Hal had encountered all sorts of difficulties and delays. One thing after another had, it appeared, been mislaid, so that it required both his and Bert’s most earnest efforts to find it. At such times there were opportunities for hurried conferences. Then Hal cut his finger while slicing bread. At least, Bert spent fully ten minutes bandaging it, although, strangely enough, there was no scar in sight the next day. The visitors, especially Slim, displayed more or less impatience, but the fire was comforting, they were fairly certain of a long respite from unwelcome attentions on the part of Sheriff Collins and they contented themselves with grumbling. In the end even Hal’s resourcefulness in the matter of inventing delays was exhausted and supper was served. It was a good supper, as it should have been since Hal had cooked up about everything in sight and practically left the larder bare. But there was none too much for the half-famished guests. They ate fast and wolfishly of everything and displayed no hesitation in asking for “seconds” or “thirds.” Yet, instead of displeasing their hosts they did just the opposite, and Hal beamed and urged them on in most hospitable fashion. In fact, if Slim and his partner had been less absorbed in the pleasant operation of satisfying twelve-

hour appetites they might easily have become suspicious at Hal's insistence.

The meal ended at last, however, by which time Hal's watch indicated ten minutes past six. It had been twelve minutes before five when he had stood at the window and seen that dark form speed away down the lake. Of course, Sheriff Collins couldn't by any possibility reach the scene until well after the robbers had gone on, but there was snow on the ground now and it ought not to be hard to trail them. There was no telling how long it would take Joe to reach North Pemberton, but, with luck—

A low ejaculation from Bert, across the table, aroused him from his conjectures and he looked up into the muzzle of a revolver in the hands of the big man. He felt much relieved when the muzzle turned to the right and covered the disturbed Bert again. The big man was talking.

“Sorry to trouble a couple of decent guys like you fellows,” said the spokesman in gruff apology, “but Slim and me are a little short of the ready. Get me? And we could do with a couple of coats, too, and maybe a couple of pairs of shoes if you happened to have any to fit. Don't bother to move, friends. Just sit easy and Slim'll take up the contribution. If you did happen to move you'd be mighty sorry for it, believe me!”

There was such a grim tone in the last utterance that neither Hal nor Bert doubted the truth of its assertion. They remained absolutely motionless while Slim's fingers explored pockets and, afterwards, rummaged bags and all likely places of concealment. The net result was some eighteen dollars in coin and three return tickets to Central

City. Hal hoped that the latter would be rejected, but not so. The big fellow seemed very pleased with them. Then there was a thorough examination of the boys' wardrobes and Slim and his companion took a fancy to some underwear, two pairs of shoes—though Hal doubted they'd fit—Bert's and Hal's mackinaws and four pair of woolen hose. Hal hoped that the men would prolong their visit to change into their new clothes, but they didn't. They put the mackinaws on, to be sure, but the rest of the plunder they took with them, or started to. That they didn't was only because just at the moment they were ready to depart the door opened most unexpectedly and a burly, red-faced man who chewed an unlighted cigar said pleasantly:

“Stick 'em up, and stick 'em up quick!”

It was somewhere about midnight that night when Camp Resthere settled down to normalcy. The three boys had then been in bed for more than an hour, but that hour had been, like the several hours preceding it, devoted to excited conversation. Now, at last, the excitement had abated. They had re-lived the whole experience, discussed and re-discussed every incident. Bert had told his actions and reactions, Hal had explained in full detail his every thought and intention and Joe had, more briefly sketched his part in the successful affair. For it certainly had been successful. The boys had recovered their property, Sheriff Collins had in his keeping the money and bonds stolen from the now convalescent Mr. Robbins and the robbers were doubtless by this time safely ensconced in the Pemberton jail. There seemed absolutely nothing left to discuss or explain, and silence had lasted for quite four minutes when Hal broke it.

“Say, Joe,” he observed out of the warm darkness, “you must have made quick time to North Pemberton. How long did it take you, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” replied Joe. “It was eleven minutes past five by the church clock when I went into the hotel down there.”

“What? Why, you didn’t leave here until twelve minutes of! That makes it—makes it—er—why, that makes it twenty-three minutes! And it must be all of five or six miles! Gee, Joe who told you you couldn’t skate?”

“Maybe your watch and that clock aren’t alike,” offered the somewhat sleepy voice of Bert. “How many times did you fall down, Joe?”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Joe answered in tones charged with incredulity and wonder; “Not once!”

“There!” exclaimed Hal triumphantly. “What did I tell you? Didn’t I say you could skate if you didn’t—didn’t *try*?”

CHAPTER XIV

ALONZO JONES SPEAKS

When they were back at school Joe proceeded enthusiastically with his skating education. Fortunately there was cold weather from New Year's Day on and plenty of hard ice. Confidence begets confidence, and Joe progressed, but he would never have thought of trying for hockey if Hal hadn't suggested it. Hal was on the school team, and so was Bert Madden, and although Bert was rather less insistent than Hal, between them they finally persuaded Joe to try for the position of goal tend with the second team. Joe won the position after a bare fortnight of competition with Mac Torrey. In February he ousted Hendricks from in front of the first team's cage, for, although Joe was still far from a really good skater, he could keep his feet under him remarkably when defending goal, had an almost miraculous ability to judge shots and stop them and could, and did, fight like a wildcat when his net was assailed. In the first game against Munson he did his share toward keeping the score as low as it was, and, although Holman's returned to Warrensburg defeated, it was generally acknowledged that Munson's 14 points might well have been 20 had a less able goal tend than Joe been on the job. And the final Munson contest found Joe working even better under more trying circumstances. Joe, though, was not the real hero of that strange game. The real hero was—but let Alonzo Jones speak.

To be quite frank, I was not pleased when, on returning to Holman's in September, I found that faculty had put Pender in with me in Number 19 Puffer. Arthur Pugsby and I had arranged, as we believed, for Pug to move down from 32, where he wasn't quite contented for the reason that the fellow he roomed with, Pete Swanson, wasn't at all Pug's sort. Swanson was absolutely all right, you understand, but he and Pug had very little in common, Swanson being rather a sporting chap and Pug caring for the scholarly side of life. Pug and I were extremely sympathetic, sharing many enthusiasms in common, such as Shelley and Keats and Walter Pater; also chess and anagrams. We even had similar tastes in food and drink, both being very fond of pastry and both preferring grape nuts to chopped walnuts on our sundaes. So, of course, we were both disappointed when we found that our plan had fallen through, and that Pug had to remain with an alien spirit like Swanson and that I was doomed to companionship with a stranger, which, of course, Pender then was. But life is filled with disappointments which, however, may frequently be made less poignant by a cheerful fortitude.

My new roommate's full name was Lamar Scott Pender, and he came from Maristown, Kentucky, where he had been attending a small school called, I believe, the Kentucky Academic Institute. I remember his saying that they had but twenty-eight pupils and thinking that its name was utterly disproportionate to its importance. In age he was my senior by a year, being sixteen and two months, but Pug always maintained that I would impress persons as being older than

Pender. I suppose that was because I had always viewed life rather more seriously than most fellows do. I think that gives one an appearance of being older than one really is, don't you? Pender was much of a gentleman, both in looks and behavior. I had always supposed that southern fellows were dark, but Pender wasn't. He had sort of chestnut colored hair and a rather fair skin and blue eyes. He explained this by not being born very far south, but I don't believe he was right about that. He had a taste for athletics, which I had not, but he was not by any means the addict that some fellows were; Swanson for instance. He tried football that fall, but didn't succeed very well, being dropped from the second team about the last of October. He took his rejection very cheerfully and joined the cross-country squad, and, I believe, did rather well in two or three runs that were held before Christmas vacation.

He entered in my class, upper middle, but he had to work pretty hard to keep up. He confessed that Holman's was quite a different school from the one he had been attending. I think he would have made better progress had he taken his studies more seriously, but he had what might be called a frivolous propensity and was always looking for fun. We got on very well together after we had become really acquainted, which was probably about the middle of October. Until that time I think both Pug and I sort of held him under observation, as you might put it. Friendship is very sacred and one should be careful in the awarding of it. I don't think that Pender realized that we were doubtful about him. If he did he never let on. But he was like that. I mean, he never looked very deeply below the surface of things. He saw only the apparent. Lots of times when Pug and I would go off

together without inviting him to come along he seemed not to notice it at all, and acted just as if he didn't care. Even after we had accepted him he never became really one of us. By that I mean that our tastes and his were dissimilar and that he never came to care for the finer things of life, like Literature and the Fine Arts and Classical Music and Philosophical Thought. He was always an outsider, but Pug and I got so we were quite fond of him, being sorry for him at the same time on account of his limitations.

Others accepted him almost at once, but they were the casual sort; fellows who went in for athletics or sang on the Glee Club or just idled their time away in the pursuit of pleasure. Both Pug and I could see that Triangle and P. K. D. began to rush him in November, and if you happen to know those societies you'll realize that Pender was rather superficial. Neither of us would ever have considered them. Although the fact is immaterial to this narrative, Pender went into Triangle in February, and as that was after the second hockey game with Munson, and as P. K. D. generally got most of the athletic heroes, there was some surprise. But I am far in advance of my story, and will now return to an evening soon after the first of December and proceed in chronological order.

Pug and I were playing chess when Lamar came in and, as was his lamentable habit, tossed his cap on the table so that the snowflakes on it were sprinkled all over the chessboard. I ought, perhaps, to say that by this time he was almost always called "Lamy", but both Pug and I preferred to address him as Lamar. I remonstrated with him for his carelessness and he laughed and said "Sorry, Jonesy," and fell into a chair. While my name is, as I think I have neglected to state, Alonzo

Jones, I have always objected to being called “Jonesy”, and I had told Lamar so frequently but without result. “Jonesy,” he went on, “have you got any skates?” I shook my head. “You, Pug?” he asked next. Pug also shook his head, scowling at the interruption, the game then being at an interesting and critical stage. Lamar sighed and drummed annoyingly on the table with his fingers. “Well, you know, I’ve got to have a pair, you fellows, and I’m stony broke. After Christmas—”

“Please desist,” I said. “We really can’t put our minds on this when you’re talking.”

Lamar grinned and started to whistle softly. After a minute Pug said: “You win, Lon. Care to try another?” I was about to say yes when Lamar jumped up and lifted the board from between us and tossed it on my bed.

“You really mustn’t,” he said. “You fellows will overwork your brains. Besides, I want to talk.”

Pug was quite sharp with him, but he didn’t seem to mind. He began talking about hockey. It seemed that there had been a call for hockey candidates and he had decided to report the next day. “Of course,” he explained, “there won’t be anything but gymnasium work until after the holidays, and I don’t suppose I can wear skates in the gym, but just the same I’d feel a lot better if I had a pair of the things. It might help me to get the atmosphere, eh?”

I said I didn’t see the necessity, and asked him if he had played much hockey.

“Hockey?” he laughed. “I don’t even know what it’s like! All I do know is that you play it on ice, wearing skates and waving a sort of golf club at a ball.”

“Puck,” corrected Pug, still haughty.

“Come again?”

“I said ‘puck,’” replied Pug. “You don’t use a ball, but a hard rubber disk called a ‘puck.’”

“Oh, I see. Much obliged, Pug. You whack it through a sort of goal, eh?”

“Into a net, to be more exact. Do you skate well?”

Lamar laughed again. “About the way a hen swims,” he said.

“Then your chance of making the hockey team will be small,” answered Pug, with a good deal of satisfaction, I thought.

“Oh, I’ll learn skating. I’ve tried it once or twice. I reckon it’s not so hard, eh?”

Pug smiled ironically. “Possibly it will come easy—to you,” he said.

“Hope so. Anyway, I’m going to have a stab at it. You don’t happen to know where I can borrow some skates, then?”

We didn’t, and Lamar went on talking about hockey until Pug gathered up the chessmen and went off. When he had gone Lamar grinned at me and said: “Corking chap, Pug. So sympathetic.” Then he got his crook-handled umbrella out of the closet and began pushing my glass paper weight about the floor with it, making his feet go as if he was skating, and upset the waste basket and a chair and got the rug all rumbled up.

A couple of days later I asked him how he was getting on with hockey, and he said. "Fine!" He said the candidates hadn't got the sticks yet; that they were just doing calisthenics. After that he reported progress every day, but we didn't pay much attention to him, because if we did he would never stop, and neither Pug nor I was interested in hockey. But afterwards I learned that Lamar used to spend hours on the gymnasium floor, outside of practice periods, shooting a puck at a couple of Indian clubs set up to make a goal. There wasn't any ice before Christmas to speak of, and so the rinks weren't even flooded.

When Lamar came back after recess he brought a fine pair of hockey skates which his uncle had given him. I said it was funny that his uncle should have known that he wanted skates, but Lamar said it wasn't funny at all because he had written to him a couple of weeks ahead and told him. I think it was about the tenth of January before the weather got cold enough to make skating possible, but after that the ice stayed right along until the first week in March. Several times Lamar wanted Pug and me to go over to the rink and see practice, but we thought it would be pretty cold work, standing around there in the snow, and we didn't go until, along in February, there was a mild Saturday and a lot of talk about a game between our team and Warwick Academy. So Pug and I, deciding that some outdoor exercise might be beneficial to us, went over and looked on. We hadn't intended remaining long, for Pug is subject to colds and I am likely to have chilblains if I stay outdoors much in winter, but as it happened we stayed right through to the end. I was quite surprised to discover that the game could be so interesting, even exciting, from the spectator's viewpoint,

and I fancy Pug was, too. Lamar, who was sitting with a number of other substitutes on a bench, wrapped in a blanket, saw us and came across and explained some of the subtleties of the game. I asked him if he was going to play and he said no, not unless all the others were killed.

Warwick didn't do very well in the first period of play, only scoring four points to Holman's seven, but in the next half the visiting team played harder and before long had tied the score at eight all. Our fellows seemed able to skate better than Warwick, but the latter showed more accuracy in putting the disk into the net. Toward the last of the contest Pug and I got quite enthusiastic and frequently joined our voices to the cheers that arose for the Holman's players. The game was very close at the end, each side alternating in the advantage, and some of the players on both sides played very roughly. It was not at all uncommon to see one player upset another, apparently by intention, and on more than one occasion as many as three fellows would be lying on the ice together. I marvelled that the referee did not penalize such rough behavior, but on comparatively few occasions did he mete out punishment. When there was but a minute or so to play Warwick shot two goals in succession and led, 15 to 13. Then Madden, who was one of our best players, got the puck away from the enemy behind their goal and took it unaided the full length of the rink and sent it between the feet of the fellow who was on guard at the net. It seemed to me that Madden was guilty of questionable tactics when he pretended to pass the disk to MacLean just before he reached the Warwick goal. That deceived the goal tender, I judged, into shifting his position to the left and made Madden's shot possible. Lamar, however, declared later that that was part of

the game. Anyway, while it gave our side another tally, it did not lead to winning the contest, and I could not help but feeling, in spite of Lamar's statement, that poetic justice had been done. I pointed this out to Pug on the way back to Puffer, but Pug was very disappointed because Holman's had not won the game, and told me between sneezes that I was deficient in patriotism. Pug had a very bad cold for several days following his exposure and so we did not attend another hockey game for almost a fortnight.

That Saturday night Lamar was very full of the game and I was quite patient with him and allowed him to talk about it as much as he liked. He told me why our side had not won. It seemed that much of the blame lay with the referee, who had never failed to note transgressions of the rules by Holman's players but had invariably been blind to similar lapses on the part of the enemy. It seemed, also, that the referee had been far too strict in the matter of "off-side." Lamar explained to me what "off-side" meant, but it was never very clear in my mind. I asked him what game he expected to play in and he shook his head and said glumly that he guessed he'd never get in any of them.

"You see, Jonesy," he went on, "the trouble with me is that I'm no skater. Oh, I can keep on my feet and get over the ice after a fashion, but I'm not in the same class with MacLean and Madden and Norwin and half a dozen others. Those sharks can speed up to ninety miles an hour, turn around on a dime and stop like a .22 short hitting a dreadnaught. I can shoot, Jonesy, if I do say it as shouldn't. Even MacLean says that. I can lift the old rubber in from any angle. When it comes to skating, though, I—well, I'm just not there."

“With practice,” I began.

“Oh, sure, but where do I practice? The only ice within four miles is the rink. Besides, what I need is about three years of it! Down in Kentucky we don’t have much good skating, and, anyway, there isn’t any ice around where I live. I thought it was easy, but it isn’t. I’d give—gee, I’d give anything ’most to be able to skate like Hop MacLean!”

“Still, if you can shoot the—the puck so well—”

“That doesn’t get me anything,” he answered gloomily. “You can’t shoot unless you’re on the ice, and they won’t let me on, except to practice. Hop says that when they change the hockey rules so as to let you play the puck sitting down or spinning on your head I’ll be one of the finest players in captivity. But, he says, until they do I’m not much use. If he wasn’t such a corking chap he’d have dropped me weeks ago. I reckon I could play goal, but that fellow Kenton has that cinched.”

“Too bad,” I said, “but possibly next year—”

“Sure, but it’s this year I’m worrying about. I got canned as a football player, I never could play baseball, and so, if I don’t get my letter at hockey I reckon I’m dished.”

“You did very well, I understand at cross-country running,” I suggested.

“Fair, for a new hand, but you don’t get your letter that way. Of course, I may manage to get on the track team as a distance runner, but I hate to depend on it.”

“Possibly you are setting too great a store on getting your letter,” I said. “Quite a few fellows get through school

without it, and I don't believe the fact prevents them from—”

“Bunk,” said Lamar. “You don't get it, Jonesy. It's Uncle Lucius I'm worrying about.”

“Is he the uncle who gave you the skates?” I asked.

“Yes. He's good for anything in the athletic line. He's nuts on sports of any kind. Hunts, fishes, plays polo, rides to hounds. It was he who sent me here, and he as much as told me that if I didn't make good this year I'd have to hustle for myself next. And that means I couldn't come back, for dad can't afford the price.”

“I must say,” I replied indignantly, “that your Uncle Lucius has most peculiar ideas!”

“Maybe, but he has 'em,” said Lamar grimly. “And that's why it means something to me to make this hockey team. Or it did mean something: I reckon I might as well quit hoping.”

CHAPTER XV

ALONZO GOES ON

While I had never had any sympathy for fellows who made a fetish of athletic sports and competitions, I could not help being concerned for Lamar. Of course it would serve his eccentric uncle right to be disappointed, but it did seem too bad to have Lamar miss his senior year. Pug thought just as I did, and so, taking an interest in Lamar's case, I went over to the rink on Tuesday to see the team practice. Pug couldn't go, on account of his cold, and he acted rather haughty when I went away, leaving him with his feet on the radiator and sneezing his head off.

I soon saw that Lamar hadn't exaggerated much when he had said that he was not a good skater. They had a sort of game between the first team and the substitutes, and Lamar held a position next in front of Joe Kenton, who was the goal guardian—and had a hard time of it. He could skate fairly well, though most ungracefully, until some one got in his way or collided with him. Then he either fell down at once or staggered to the side of the rink and fell over the barrier. On one occasion, when he had got the puck, he started off with it and was doing quite nicely until one of the other side got in front of him. Lamar tried to dodge, and I really felt sorry for him because all the fellows on the ice and all those looking on began to laugh at him like anything. You see, he lost control of himself entirely and went spinning across the rink on one skate, with the other pointing toward the sky, his arms

waving and a most horrified expression on his face. He kept right on going until he struck the barrier and then dived over it into the snow, head first.

I will say, however, that when it came to returning the puck down the rink he was extremely clever, for he could do what very few of the others could do; he could lift the puck off the ice with a peculiar movement of his stick and send it quite a distance and very swiftly through the air. I gathered from remarks about me that a “lifted” puck was more difficult to stop than one merely slid along on the surface of the ice. But, of course, when the first team players came down to the goal where Lamar was he didn’t help very much. He generally charged into the first player who arrived and they went down together. I returned to Puffer before the game was ended, convinced that Lamar would never get the much coveted letter through playing hockey!

The next Saturday the team went to Munson to play Munson Academy, Holman’s chief athletic rival, and was beaten by 14 goals to 11. Of course Lamar didn’t play, although he was taken along. I heard all about the game from him, and I gathered that our team had been defeated because of poor shooting. Holman’s it seemed, had “skated rings around the other team” but had missed many more goals than it had made. I believe, too, that the referee had favored the enemy somewhat, and I wondered why it was that the officials so frequently erred in that particular. I mentioned the matter to Lamar, but he only said “Humph!”

After that there were several other games, most of which our team won. Pug and I saw all of them, although on several occasions the weather was extremely cold and I frequently

suffered with chilblains as a result of the exposure to the elements. Lamar played in some of the contests, usually toward the last and always when our side was safely in the lead. He had improved quite a good deal, but was still far from perfect. He fell down less frequently and was even able to dodge about fairly well without losing control of the puck. He also, on several occasions, made some remarkably good goals, sending the disk into the net at about the height of the goal man's knees, which seemed to worry the latter a good deal. Then March arrived and the weather moderated somewhat, and finally only the last Munson game remained to be played. We played but two games with Munson, one at Munson and one at Warrensburg, the team winning most goals in the two contests becoming the victor. It was hoped that, as Munson was but three goals ahead now, and as our team would have some slight advantage owing to playing on its own rink, we could win the championship. Lamar was very certain that we could win, and told Pug and me why by the hour. Or he did when we allowed him to. Lamar was almost hopeful of getting his letter, after all, for MacLean, who was our captain, had told him that if Holman's "had the game on ice" at the end he would put Lamar in for a few minutes. I asked if they were thinking of playing the game anywhere but on the ice, and Lamar explained that the expression he had used signified having the game safe. I told him I considered the expression extremely misleading, but he paid no attention, being very excited about the morrow's game.

When we awoke the next day, though, it looked as if there would be no game, for the weather had grown very mild over night, the sun was shining warmly and water was running or

dripping everywhere. Lamar gave one horrified look from the window and, throwing a few clothes on, hastened to the rink. When he returned he was much upset. The ice, he said, was melting fast and there was already a film of water over it. The game was scheduled for three o'clock, and if the ice kept on melting there wouldn't be any left by that time, and without ice there could be no game, and if there was no game—Lamar choked up and could get no further. I really felt awfully sorry for him, even if it was perfectly absurd to magnify a mere contest of physical force and skill to such proportions.

Fortunately, the sun went under later and, while it was still mild and muggy, it seemed that there might possibly be enough ice left in the afternoon to play on. I was very glad, for Lamar's sake, and so was Pug. Pug, I fear, had become somewhat obsessed by hockey. I had found a blue paper-covered book about the game under a pillow on his window-seat one day, and while he declared that it belonged to Swanson, I wasn't fooled.

About noon MacLean and the others viewed the rink and the manager got the Munson folks on the wire and told them that the ice wasn't fit to play on and that if Munson wanted to postpone the game—but Munson didn't. They thought we were trying to avoid playing it, probably, and said they'd be over as planned and that they guessed a postponement wouldn't be wise, because the weather might get worse instead of better. So the game was played, and Pug and I went. We were rather late, because Pug had mislaid one of his galoshes, but he found it finally, under Swanson's bed, and we got to the rink to find that it was lined two and three deep all around the boards. We found a place to squeeze in

behind the Holman's bench, though, and by stretching our necks we could see fairly well. We were glad afterwards that we hadn't got close to the barrier, because every time a player swiped at the puck or turned short on his skates he sent a shower of slush and water over the nearer spectators.

There was a good half-inch of water over the rink, and under the water the ice was pitted and soft, especially near the barriers, and now and then the sun would come out for a few minutes and make things worse. No one except Pug and I wore a coat, I think, and we soon wished we hadn't. Of course fast skating was impossible on a surface like that, and the first period was only about half over when the rink looked as if it had been flooded with white corn meal and water. When one of the players went down, which was far more frequently than usual, he got up wet and dripping; and once when the referee got a skate tangled with some one else's and slid about six yards in a sitting position, laughter was spontaneous and hearty from both sides of the rink.

Our fellows had already scored twice and Munson once when Pug and I got there, and there wasn't any more scoring for quite some time. This was largely because no one could shoot very well, having to hunt for the puck in the slush first and then not being able to knock it very far through the water. Several times one side or the other got the puck right in front of the other team's goal, but usually it got lost and the referee had to blow his whistle and dig it out from somewhere. It was during one of these confused scrambles that Munson scored her second goal. It looked to Pug and me as if one of the Munson fellows had slid the puck in with his skate, and our goal man, Kenton, said so, too. But the umpire

behind the net waved his hand in the air and said it was all right, and so that tied the score at 2-all.

It was pretty exciting, and every one was playing as hard as he knew how, and some one was always tumbling down and water flew everywhere. There were a good many penalties, too, and once there were but nine players on the ice, instead of twelve. They didn't try to do much real skating toward the last, but just ran about digging the points of their skates into the soft ice. There was lots of enthusiasm and cheering, and lots of laughing. Pug was howling about all the time and dancing around on my feet. I tried to restrain him, but he wouldn't pay much attention to me, declaring that I had been shouting, too, which certainly was a misstatement. When the period was almost over Munson had a remarkable piece of luck, making two goals, one right after the other, and the half ended with the score in her favor, 4 to 2.

The players looked as if they had been in bathing, and MacLean was dripping water even from the end of his nose. Kenton was the wettest, of all, though, and said he had bubbles in his ears. I heard him explaining that the reason Munson had made those two last goals was because his eyes were so full of water he couldn't see through them. During the intermission MacLean and Madden and the others were trying to figure out how they could win that game in the next half. They had to make five goals now to tie the score of the series and six to win; always supposing they could keep Munson from scoring, too! Norwin suggested getting a puck made of cork so it would float, and MacLean told him to shut his face or talk sense.

“What we need,” said the captain sort of bitterly, “is a couple of guys who can shoot a goal once in six tries!”

“Sure,” agreed Norwin, “but I didn’t notice you shooting many!”

MacLean gave him a haughty look, but he only said: “No, I’m as rotten as you are, Hal. How would it be if we played a five-man attack next half? We’ve got to score somehow. If we can get the puck up to their goal we might get it in. We can’t do it on long shots, that’s sure!”

So they talked about that, and Pug and I, being right behind them, couldn’t help hearing them. And while they were still discussing the matter Pug pulled my sleeve. “Say, Lon,” he said, “why don’t they let Lamar play? He’s a good shot, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but he can’t skate, you idiot,” I answered.

“He wouldn’t need to. Nobody’s doing any skating, Lon. They’re all just floundering around on their points. I’ll bet that if they put Lamar in to play—”

I didn’t hear any more, because just then I leaned down and touched MacLean on the shoulder, and when he looked up said: “Pardon me, but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation, and I’d like very much to make a suggestion ___”

“All right,” said MacLean, rather rudely, I thought, “make all you want, kid, but don’t bother me. I’ve got troubles of my own.”

But I persisted, in spite of his scowls, and when he understood what I was driving at he acted quite differently.

Of course he made the absurd objection that Lamar couldn't skate well enough, but I pointed out to him that Lamar could skate as well as any of the players had been skating, and he recognized the wisdom of the suggestion. I must say, however, that he showed small appreciation, for he never even said thank you, but turned right away and yelled for Lamar.

"Lamy," he said, "can you shoot a few goals if I put you in this half?"

"Sure," said Lamar. "You let me in there, Hop, and if I don't make that goal tend of theirs think he's at the Battle of the Marne you won't owe me a cent!"

"I'll owe you a swift kick, though," growled MacLean. "All right. You take Norwin's place. We'll manage to feed the puck to you, I guess. Do your best, Lamy. We've got to cop this somehow!"

They had sort of bailed out the rink with brooms and snow shovels and buckets, and when the second half began you could see the ice in most places. Lamar was in Norwin's place and Norwin was playing in front of the goal. For two or three minutes Munson kept the puck and tried four or five shots before our fellows got it away from her. None of the shots went very near our net, though. After that MacLean got away and pushed the puck up the rink, with the other forwards lined across the ice and Lamar a few feet behind. MacLean tried to pass to Madden, but a Munson fellow hooked the disk away. Then Lamar bumped hard into the Munson player and they both sat down and slid, and Brill got the puck back and every one yelled "*Shoot! Shoot!*" But Brill passed back to Madden and Madden took the disk in closer,

and about that time every one gathered around and sticks pushed and whacked and I couldn't see the puck at all. The Munson goal man was dodging back and forth, kicking his feet and whanging away with his stick, and his eyes were fairly bulging out of his head. And then, somehow, the puck got hit back up the rink and no one saw it for an instant except Lamar, who had got to his feet again. Lamar dug the points of his skates and raced up to it and, before any of the Munson fellows could reach him, had got the blade of his stick under that puck and made a quick motion with his wrists and there was a streak of water through the air and the umpire behind the goal shouted and threw his hand up!

Well, Pug and I yelled like mad, and so did every one else; every one, of course, except the fifty or sixty Munson fellows who had come along with their team. That made the score 6 to 5. Munson got the puck from the center, but couldn't keep it, and after a minute Madden slid it across to Brill and Brill started in with it. Then, when a Munson fellow threatened him, pushed it behind him, and that was Lamar's chance. He was almost in the middle of the rink, but he was alone, and before any one could interfere he had picked that disk out of the slush and sent it, knee high toward the goal. Half a dozen fellows looked to be in the way and some of them tried hard to stop it, but it got by them all and landed in the corner of the net, while the goal man, who had tried to stop it, too, picked himself up and patted the water from the seat of his shorts.

Well, there wouldn't be any use in trying to tell about the rest of the game in detail. From 6-all the score went to 8—6 in our favor, Lamar shooting all the goals. Then, just for variety, MacLean made one himself, though it looked pretty

lucky to me, and after that Munson made one. But that was the last of her scoring. Lamar shot another from near the barrier that hit the goal man's stick and bounced into the goal, and Munson lost heart. Of course her players just stuck around Lamar to keep him from shooting, but that didn't work very well, for he generally got away from them, or, if he didn't MacLean or one of the others shot. Toward the last of it they just sort of massed themselves in front of their goal and tried to hide it. Even so, Lamar got a couple through, and several more damaged the defenders considerably, one fellow stopping the puck unintentionally with his chin. It seemed that Lamar couldn't miss, and, because his shots were always off the ice, they were hard to stop, and so, when the final whistle sounded, the score was 18 to 7 and Lamar was credited with nine of the eighteen! That gave us the series by eight points, and the championship, and there was a lot more cheering, especially for Lamar, and Pug and I went back to Puffer.

I felt quite a lot of satisfaction because my suggestion to put Lamar into the game had, beyond the shadow of a doubt, accomplished the victory for our team, and I mentioned the fact to Pug. Pug, though, was rather nasty, claiming that the original idea had been his. However, I made short work of that ridiculous contention, the more easily since Pug, having yelled all through the contest and got his feet wet in spite of his galoshes, wasn't able to speak above a whisper. I warned him that he would have a sore throat to-morrow, but he scowled at me.

"I don't care," he said hoarsely. "I don't care if I do! We won the championship! And—and, by golly, next year I'm going to play hockey myself!"

Which shows how even the briefest contact with athletic affairs may corrupt one.

CHAPTER XVI

GINGER BURKE

“Hello!”

“Babe” Linder, the big catcher of the Holman’s School nine, turned in the operation of pulling on his huge mitt and observed the speaker with mild interest. “Hello, son,” he returned gravely. “Is it natural or did science achieve that brilliant result?”

“What yer mean?” asked the other, earnest and anxious.

“Your hair, son. How did you get it that way?”

“It’s always been red,” answered the smaller youth, unoffended, but dropping his steady gaze a moment while he dug in the dirt in front of the bench with one scuffed shoe.

“You can’t beat Nature, can you?” sighed Babe.

The boy looked doubtful, but after a moment of hesitation gave a nod of agreement. Three or four other members of the team came around the corner of the stand, followed by the coach, Gus Cousins, and, subsequently, by Cicero Brutus Robinson, pushing a wheelbarrow containing base sacks, bat bag, protector, mask and the daily paraphernalia of practice. Cicero, who was extremely black, very squat and interestingly bandy-legged, deposited his vehicle at the end of the bench and, wiping his glittering ebony forehead with the sleeve of a faded blue shirt, lifted the base sacks from the wheelbarrow and ambled leisurely away with them. A

smallish, attenuated boy who had entered on Cicero's heels, dragged the bat bag forth and unstrapped it. More players arrived, accompanied by a studious looking senior in street attire who clutched a large score-book in one hand and a box of balls in the other. Babe Linder gave greetings to the newcomers and, thudding the big mitten approvingly, even affectionately, moved along the bench. Unnoted by him, the red-haired youth kept close beside him. Babe selected a discolored baseball from among the dozen in the bottom of a fiber bucket and—

“Say!”

Babe looked down. “Son,” he asked gently, “do I owe you money, or what?”

“No, sir.” Two deep blue eyes looked appealingly up from a tanned and freckled face. “Say, do you want a bat boy?”

“A bat boy? No. I couldn't use one.”

“I mean the team, sir.”

“Oh! Why, we've got one, son. That's he over there.”

“Yeah, I seen him.” There was much contempt in the boy's tone. “He ain't no good, sir.”

“Eh? Well, confidentially, I agree with you, but there he is, what?” Dave Cochran, dean of the pitching staff, joined them and Babe addressed him gravely. “This young gentleman, Davy, seeks a position on the team.”

Dave studied the boy smilingly. “Well, we sure do need a catcher,” he said. “Can you catch, kid?”

The boy nodded, digging his toe again. “Yeah, but he’s just kiddin’, Mister. I want to be your bat boy.”

“Oh, that’s it? Well, you’re about a month late. We already have young Cecil acting in that capacity.”

“Is that his name, honest?” inquired the boy with what might be called hopeful disgust.

“No, not honest, but that’s what he’s called,” replied Babe. “After all, what’s in a name? And, speaking of names, son, what is yours?”

“Gi——” He swallowed and started fresh. “Robert Burke.”

“Fine! And what do they call you?” asked Dave.

“Ginger.” The boy smiled for the first time, a smile that lighted up his homely countenance and won both members of his audience instantly.

“Son,” said Babe, “if this was my outfit I’d engage you like a shot, but it isn’t. You see, we’ve got a bat boy—”

“I can lick him easy,” remarked Ginger Burke conversationally. Then he added, hopefully: “If that guy wasn’t around could I have his job?”

Babe and Dave exchanged amused glances. “Ginger,” said Babe, “we’d hate to have anything happen to Cecil, but it’s my private hunch that—” Babe coughed deprecatingly—“that if—er—Cecil was *non est*, so to speak, your chance of filling his shoes would be excellent. Am I right, Dave?”

Dave grinned as he reached for the ball that Babe was juggling. “Them’s my sentiments, Mr. Linder. Come on and

let me warm up the old wing.”

With none challenging him, Ginger climbed into the stand and became an interested observer of what followed. Ever and anon his glance strayed from Babe or Dave to the person of Cecil. That Cecil was not the thin youth's correct name bothered Ginger not at all. He felt that it should have been his name even if it wasn't, and he disapproved of it thoroughly, just as he disapproved of the bat boy's lack of interest in his professional duties and his laggard movements when he retrieved a ball. “He's a dumb-bell,” was Ginger's verdict. “He ain't got no license around here, that kid!” As a matter of fact, Cecil was to all appearances quite as old as Ginger, and fully as tall, even if, as happened, he was built on a more niggardly style, and therefor the use of the term “kid” by Ginger was unconscious swank.

Afternoon practice ended at last and the field emptied, the players walking back across the football field and past the tennis courts to the big gymnasium whose long windows were crimson in the light of the sinking sun. To the gymnasium also meandered Cicero Brutus Robinson, pushing his wheelbarrow, and Coach Cousins and Manager Naylor, the latter pair in earnest converse. Thither, also, strolled the few students who had by ones and twos joined Ginger Burke in the stand during the progress of the afternoon's proceedings. Of all those at the field two alone turned townwards at the last. These were Cecil—whose real name, by the way, happened to be William James Conners—and Ginger Burke. They did not go together. Indeed, a full half block separated them on their journey to Warrensburg, and to an observer it might have appeared that that distance was being intentionally maintained by the latter of the two,

who was Ginger. Observers, however, were few, for the half mile between school campus and town was at that hour practically deserted, and the few, their thoughts doubtless fixed on the evening meal, paid small heed to the two youths, nor guessed that the first was cast in the rôle of Vanquished and the last in the rôle of Victor in an impending drama. At the border of town Cecil turned to the left. So did Ginger.

The next afternoon when Babe swung around the corner of the stand, pulling on his mitten, and turned toward the bucket of practice balls a voice arrested him.

“Here y’are!”

Babe glimpsed something grayish arching toward him and instinctively shot out his mitt. Such attention on the part of Cecil was unprecedented, and Babe gazed in mild astonishment. It was, however, not Cecil but Ginger who met that gaze, Ginger gravely earnest, anxious to anticipate the big catcher’s next desire.

“Huh,” said Babe. “Where’s Cecil?”

“He ain’t coming,” replied Ginger. “He’s resigned.”

“Resigned, eh? Which hospital is he in, son?”

Ginger disregarded the question. “Who’s the feller that hires the bat boys?” he asked.

“Son, are you laboring under the mistaken impression that this job brings in real money?” asked Babe.

“No, sir, I ain’t looking for any money, but it seems like if the boss would say it was all right for me to be—”

“I get you. Come along. Oh, Bert! Meet my particular friend, Ginger Burke, Bert. Ginger’s the new bat boy. The former incumbent has been forced to resign. Ill health, I believe.”

“Why, I didn’t know that,” said Bert Naylor, puzzled. “Well, it’s all right, I suppose. You say you know this kid, Babe? Well—” The manager observed Ginger sternly through his glasses. “We don’t pay anything, you know. If you want to—to—if you want the place, all right, but we—er—we don’t pay anything.”

“Now you’re all right,” said Babe as Naylor hurried off. “You’re official bat boy, son, with the inestimable privilege of writing ‘B. B.’ after your name. I would like to know, though, how you induced Cecil to resign. Did you crown him with a brick, or just—ah—” Babe delivered an imaginary upper-cut against an imaginary adversary. But Ginger only shook his head.

“There wasn’t no trouble,” he said evasively. “I—I just talked to him.”

Babe viewed him doubtfully. “Well, all right, son, if you prefer not to recall the sanguinary details. On your job now. Watch the balls, see that the water bucket’s filled, get your bats out—” Babe stopped for the reason that a swift survey showed the bats neatly arranged on the grass and the water bucket brimming. “All right,” he ended flatly. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

Ginger never confided about Cecil, but the story reached Babe and the rest eventually by way of Cicero Brutus Robinson, who, it appeared, had learned it from the deposed

Cecil. Ginger had accosted Cecil a block short of the latter's domicile and had frankly informed him that he, Ginger, coveted the position of bat boy for the school baseball team. "You," said Ginger, though possibly in not these exact words, "are not equal to the demands of such an exacting employment. It is evident to me that your heart is not in your work. Now I'll tell you what I'll do, kid. I'll match you for it." Cecil, however, had indignantly declined this offer; had, indeed, heaped derision on Ginger and his ambition. Thereupon Ginger, retaining his placidity, had made a second offer. "All right, kid, I'll pay you for it. I'll give you fifty cents, twenty-five cents right now and twenty-five cents next week." Cecil had considered this offer more tolerantly, but had countered with a proposal of one dollar in lieu of the sum named. Ginger had firmly refused to pay a dollar and had so reached his third and final proposition. "Nothing doin'," Ginger had replied, "but—" and one fancied a new enthusiasm in his tones—"but I'll fight you for it, kid!" Cecil had regarded Ginger dubiously as the latter slipped out of his jacket, had cast anxious glances up and down the deserted, darkening street and had seen the wise course. "Give me the quarter," said Cecil.

As Official Bat Boy and Mascot of the Holman School Baseball Team, Ginger made good right from the start. He was, in fact, a revelation. None of the players had before realized just how useful a bat boy could really be when he set his mind on it. Ginger was efficiency itself. The water pail was always full, the paper drinking cups never gave out, the balls no longer got lost merely by falling outside the field, bats always reposed in orderly precision before the bench and never a player had to bend his august back to pick one

up. Ginger invariably knew which one—or two—each batsman favored and was ready with it, or them, on the second. He was always cheerful, always the optimist, always hopeful to the last bitter moment of defeat. When a hit meant a run and a run meant a tied score or a victory Ginger believed, or professed to, that the hit was forthcoming. Even if it was the weakest batter, Ginger gave him his favorite bat with a smile of confidence and a low word of encouragement that seldom failed to help.

Ginger possessed, too, a remarkable acumen in the matter of baseball practical and baseball theoretical, and although he almost never volunteered advice, his wisdom, the wisdom of an earnest student of the game, was always on tap. When it came to strategy Ginger was positively uncanny, having, it seemed, acquired in his thirteen years of existence a thorough understanding of the workings of the human mind. You are not to suppose that the games were run to Ginger's directions, of course, for, as a matter of fact, his advice was seldom called for; yet during the six weeks that followed his arrival there occurred more than one occasion when Gus Cousins, watching a contest with Ginger beside him on the bench, discussed affairs as man with man and, unconsciously accepting Ginger's ideas as his own, acted on them.

It was to Babe Linder that Ginger especially attached himself. He served every man on the squad faithfully, liked them all and was liked in return, but Babe was his hero, and where Babe was, there, too, as near as might be, was Ginger. Ginger fairly adopted the big catcher and guarded his welfare with a care that was almost maternal. Babe never had to strap on his leg-guards nowadays, for Ginger was always waiting to perform that service. Then Ginger handed him his

protector and mask and watched his progress to the plate with anxious pride. When Babe came back to the bench there was Ginger with his old sweater held out to him. Of course all this aroused the other members to laughter, and they ragged Babe about it; but they were careful not to do it when Ginger was about. Every one liked Ginger whole-heartedly, from the coach down to young Smithers, who sat day after day on the bench and waited for something to happen to “Mac” Torrey so that he might at last play right field! After practice or a game Ginger would walk worshipfully at Babe’s side back to Routledge Hall. At the entrance it was always:

“Come on up, Ginger.”

“Naw, I guess not.”

“Well, night, son.”

“Night, Babe.”

CHAPTER XVII

ONE ALL

Ginger called all and sundry by their first names; all, that is, save Gus Cousins and Manager Naylor. Gus was “Mister Coach” and Naylor was just “Mister.” There was no hint of disrespect in Ginger’s address, and the word “sir” was seldom absent. It was on one of those homeward walks after a Friday practice that Babe learned about all there was to be learned of his admirer. Ginger lived with his father, who was a mason, in a two-room tenement. His mother had died when he was a baby. There had been a small sister once, but she, too, had died. Ginger went to high school and didn’t mind studying—much. When he grew up he was going to be a baseball player until he had made enough money to buy a team of his own. He had played ball since he was seven, or maybe eight, on the back lots or down by the railroad yards. He’d had a team of his own last summer and had licked about every other team of its age in the neighborhood. He pitched sometimes, but generally he played second base or shortstop. Maybe he would get a nine together again this summer, but he wanted to learn all the baseball he could, which was why he had sought the privilege of toiling without remuneration for the school team. Once he had saved up some money and gone to the city and seen a Big League game, but it hadn’t been much of a game, after all: “them fellows pulled a lot of bone-head plays that day!”

To all appearances Ginger had attached himself to a losing cause when he had thrown in his lot with the Holman's team. Since early April the Light Green had won ten and lost seven; not a very good performance for the nine whose two straight over Munson Academy last spring had completed a record of fourteen victories out of eighteen contests. Holman's though, had lost seriously by graduation and only Dave, Babe, Captain Hal Norwin, Joe Kenton and "Mac" Torrey remained of those who had played against Munson. It was a good fielding team, but batting was a lost art to it and the pitching staff was a weak support. For one of Holman's four twirlers to go nine innings was exceptional; usually it took three to land a victory. Dave, a left-hander, was having tragic lapses from his last year's cunning. Bellows, slow-ball artist, had yet to survive a seventh inning. Jones, last year's freshman southpaw, was streaky and explosive. Meadows, more nerve than experience, was as yet but a promising cub. Coach Cousins, though, wasn't discouraged, and still hoped to capture the Munson series; and if the Light Green triumphed over the Blue-and-Gold all that had gone before was as nothing. To such a situation, then, did Ginger Burke attach himself.

Two days after Ginger's advent Holman's was beaten once more, this time by Milton. Then, the following Wednesday, she faced the Benson Athletics, a hard-hitting aggregation of mill employees. Tom Meadows lasted an inning and a half, after which Dave Cochran carried the game through to a 4 to 2 victory. That victory seemed to turn the tide for the Light Green. Holman's entered on a winning streak as startling as it was gratifying. Bordentown, State Agricultural, Ogden and Louisburg were defeated; after which Holman's journeyed to

Wayne City and won a hard contest from Deacon College. Three days later another pilgrimage resulted less satisfactorily, for the Light Green fell before the superior batting prowess of Jamesville and her winning streak was broken. But the next Wednesday found her on the long end of a 9 to 3 score against St. John's, which, since St. John's had beaten her badly earlier in the season, was a gratifying and encouraging event. The next game also went Holman's way, although eleven innings were required to convince Townsend that she was beaten.

It was during the Ogden game that Joe Kenton, second baseman, awaiting his turn at bat, watched Wentworth's two-bagger go screeching over second and observed to the bench at large: "There goes their old ball game!" Then, when Charlie Prince and Ted Purves had sped across the rubber, Joe winked at Babe and addressed Ginger, squatting at Babe's feet.

"Ginger," said Joe, "you sure brought us luck. As a mascot I'll say you're a wonder!"

Ginger looked back over his shoulder gravely and, after an infinitesimal pause, replied convincingly: "You guys was sure needing a mascot when I come!"

That was as close as any one ever got to making Ginger claim the credit for the team's success, but they all had the conviction that modesty alone held him back, and since baseball players, even school amateurs, are all leavened with harmless superstition there were plenty among them who would listen to no argument against the mascot theory. Babe said loudly and often that it was a great day for the old school when Ginger came on the scene! By this time the red-

haired bat boy was a school institution, in a manner of speaking. He was as much a part of the team as—well, almost as much a part as Captain Hal Norwin himself. He had even attained literary celebrity in the columns of the school monthly. Holman's had taken him for her own and was proud of him; and rendered him the respect due one who, even if you said it only in jest, had put the school back on the baseball map. Ginger now appeared appropriately attired at the games. A discarded shirt of Babe's, bearing a green H on one breast, had been cut down to fit him, and from Captain Hal had come the breeches. The latter, so long as Ginger didn't bend too far forward, were quite presentable. Ginger also had a cap and a pair of green stockings, and thus attired, feet widely spread, arms akimbo, eyes attentively on the game, he presented a notable appearance. And when, thrusting back his cap—an action induced by excitement—he revealed that unbelievably red thatch of his the picture was almost epic!

June came on the scene with a fine run of blue skies and hot sunshine, and the Holman's team went on winning ball games. Of course she lost now and then. When you came to investigate matters closely you wondered why she didn't lose a lot more. The pitchers were doing better, but not so much better, the batting showed improvement but was still well under last year's percentage. Perhaps Fortune was rooting for the Light Green, or perhaps the team had found faith in itself. Certain it is that the breaks of the game went often to Holman's those days, and any one knows that it's better to be lucky than rich.

In the matter of batting, Holman's was a weak crowd. Outside Captain Hal Norwin and Ted Purves and Joe Kenton,

there wasn't a dependable hitter on the team. Sometimes Bud Thomas came across with a needed wallop, and occasionally little Charlie Prince, demon third baseman, laid down a nice bunt. But for the rest—why, as Ginger phrased it to himself, “junk!” They tried hard enough, both at practice and in games, and they almost wore out a brand-new batting net, but all to very little purpose. If they had the eye they didn't have the swing, and vice versa. There was Babe, for instance. Babe was a corking catcher, big enough to block off a runner at the plate, quick enough to cover the whole back-lot on fouls, an unerring shot to second and steady under almost any provocation to be otherwise. But at the bat he was Samson shorn. Babe was a slugger, which is to say that he took a long swing and a hard one and, having connected with the ball, was likely to smash it out into the cinder piles that intervened between the ball field and Conyer's Creek. The cinder piles meant three bases always, usually four. But, like many other sluggers, Babe was an infrequent hitter. If pitchers would put the old pill between waist and shoulder, Babe could show them something, but pitchers had a deplorable way of sending them over knee-high or working deceptive drops on the big fellow, and, all in all, as a hitter in the pinches Babe was about as much use as salt in a ham sandwich: which, again, is Ginger's phrase and not mine.

This troubled Ginger as much, if not more, than it did Babe. Ginger was a hero worshiper, and Babe was his object of idolatry, and Ginger wanted him 100 per cent perfect. As it was, 75 was a lot nearer the mark. And Ginger, or so he was fully persuaded, knew wherein lay Babe's weakness. Babe's bat was too heavy. Other aspiring batsmen might use one bat to-day and another to-morrow, experimenting in the

effort to find the weapon best suited to them. But not so Babe. Babe was big and long of arm and powerful, and he craved a bat to match. The one he used, his own private weapon, was a veritable club of Hercules, long and stout and appallingly heavy, of the “wagon-tongue” model, of a dingy gray-black tinge and with the handle wrapped far down with elastic tape. Babe was somewhat obsessed on the subject of that bat. He was convinced that it was the only weapon possible in his case, and convinced that just as soon as Fortune gave him an even break he would make it talk to the extent of .300 or over. Ginger thought contrariwise, and the matter was the basis of frequent arguments between the two. Or, perhaps, arguments is the wrong word, for Babe never would argue about it. Babe was as stubborn as a mule on the subject of that bat.

“Honest, Babe,” Ginger would urge earnestly, “that bat’s too heavy. It ain’t balanced, either. It makes you swing late. That’s the trouble with you, Babe. I’ve been watching and I know. You’re late for the ball most always. Now if you had a lighter bat—”

“Son, I’ve tried them, I tell you, and—”

“Two, three years ago!” scoffed Ginger. “Try ’em again, won’t you, please, sir? Honest I ain’t kiddin’, Babe; I wish you would!”

“Oh, I’ve got to have something I can feel, Ginger. Gosh, I don’t know there’s anything in my hands when I pick up one of those toothpicks.”

“But I ain’t asking you to use one of them real light ones, Babe! Just try one that’s a little lighter first—”

Babe laughed good-naturedly and ruffled Ginger's flaming hair. "Quit your kidding, son, quit your kidding. Watch the way the old bat soaks them to-morrow."

And to-morrow Ginger, watching Babe's humiliation, almost wept!

Ginger never gave up the fight, though, and any one but the good-natured Babe would have wearied of the importunities and become violent. Ginger even besought the aid of Gus Cousins, but the coach only sighed and shrugged.

"I know, kid. I've begged him to try something different fifty times, but he's so confounded stubborn you might just as well talk to that water bucket. He's too good a catcher to be a good batter, anyway. I guess even if he swung a lighter bat he'd still miss most of 'em."

The week before the first game of the series with Munson, Holman's had a slump and lost two contests running. The infield, which had played clean, snappy ball all spring, went bad and booted half its chances. Medfield walked off with Saturday's game, 14 to 2, without making a hit that wasn't clearly scratch. Errors did the rest, errors and a finally disgruntled pitcher. Monday and Tuesday witnessed hard and unremitting practice, and on Wednesday Holman's journeyed down state to Munson and crossed bats with the Blue-and-Gold before a maniacal assemblage of students and alumni, to say nothing of a brass band, and lost deservedly. Bellows was knocked from the box in the second inning, by which time Munson had accumulated four runs, and Lou Jones took his place. Lou wavered along to the sixth and then began to issue passes. When he had handed out his fourth in that inning, and Munson's score was 5 runs, Dave Cochran

replaced him. Dave held the enemy safe for the rest of the way, but the damage was already done. Holman's had made a lone tally in the fourth, and in the first of the ninth she started a rally when, with one out, Tom Wentworth hit safely for two bases. Joe Kenton laid down a bunt and was safe on a close decision. Torrey hit to shortstop and was safe on a fielder's choice, Tom going out at third. Bud Thomas hit an easy fly to left that was misjudged and muffed, and, with bases full, a hit good for two tallies and a home-run tying the score, Babe advanced determinedly, swinging his big black-handled club.

Ginger looked on strainedly, and I think he uttered a little earnest prayer for Babe. But why prolong the suspense? It was over after five pitched balls. Babe watched one strike go past him and swung at two more. You could hear his "*Ugh!*" on the Holman's bench as the force of his swing carried him half around, but you couldn't hear any soul-stirring crash of bat against ball. Ginger groaned and pulled his cap far over his eyes. Gus Cousins shrugged. The Munson band blared and the Class Day crowd took possession of the field.

Holman's trailed back to Baldwin, a rather silent crowd. Babe stared at his hands most of the way, unseeing of the sorrowing yet sympathetic and forgiving regard of Ginger.

The next morning there was an hour's batting practice and a long fielding work-out, and at two o'clock the rivals faced each other again. To-day was Holman's Class Day and her day for sound and fury, but Holman's had fewer rooters than the larger school and could produce no band. To-day Holman's, cheered by her cohorts and on her own field, got away to a good start. In the second inning Ted Purves hit safely, stole second and reached third on Tom Wentworth's

out. Joe Kenton was passed. Mac Torrey drove a hot liner to second, second baseman booted it and Ted scored. Bud Thomas bunted toward the pitcher's box and Cross, Munson's ace, after holding the runners, threw the ball two yards wide of first. When the dust had settled two more runs had crossed. Babe fouled out to third baseman. Bellows drew a pass. Hal Norwin, head of the list, tried two bunts and failed and then hit the ball over third. Mac and Bud romped home. Prince was thrown out at first and Ted Purves fouled out to catcher. Five tallies graced the score board.

Those five would have been sufficient, for George Bellows held Munson scoreless to the fifth, when two hits and a sacrifice fly netted one run, and afterwards to the end, but in the seventh Holman's added two more tallies for good measure when, with Torrey on second and two down, Babe made the old bat speak at last. Cross had given way to Boyd, and Boyd perhaps forgot Babe's predilection for high ones. That as may have been, Babe connected with a shoulder-high delivery just over the edge of the plate and sent it screaming to the very edge of Conyer's Creek, and romped around the bases unchallenged. When he turned, grinning, toward the bench, there was the dignified Ginger standing on his head, his brilliant locks mingling with the dust of the trampled field.

Later, said Babe: "Well, how about the old cudgel now, son?"

Ginger shook his head and spoke sadly. "Babe, that guy didn't ought to have pitched you a high one. That was a James H. Dandy of a hit, all right, all right, but it don't prove nothing, Babe, nothing at all."

Babe laughed and ruffled Ginger's dusty hair. "Son," he said, "you're just plain stubborn!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DECIDING GAME

That was Thursday. The deciding game was to be played in the city on Saturday. The Holman's team returned to the well-nigh empty campus and settled down for the wait. Gus didn't make the mistake of working them hard on Friday. There was a little batting and a little throwing and a long talk under the shade of the stand; and, of course, the pitchers worked their sweaters off; but there was nothing strenuous that day. One just sat around and waited—and hoped.

Late that Friday afternoon Ginger was an unobtrusive unit in a group of five who lolled on the campus sward where a big elm cast an oasis of shade in a sun-smitten Sahara. It was very hot and very still, and the deserted dormitories seemed to have dropped asleep for the summer. Conversation had been desultory, but all of the morrow's game. Now Captain Hal said smilingly, but with an undertone of earnestness: "Babe, it's too bad you didn't save that homer for to-morrow."

"There's another where that came from," replied Babe.

"Not a chance," said Dave. "They'll walk you every time you come up."

"I don't believe," answered Babe. "You see, I haven't been hitting much, and they'll think that was just an accident."

“Brainy guys, then,” murmured Dave, pillowing his head more comfortably on one of Babe’s ample legs.

“Is that so, fresh?” Babe pressed the heel of a big hand sternly on Dave’s classic nose and elicited a groan of protest. “If they’ll put the old pill where I can reach it, Dave, it’s going to travel.”

“Sure, all you want is a straight one across your chest. That’s not much to ask, eh? Seems like they might do you a slight favor like that, what? Then, if it happens you can swing that old bridge timber of yours around in time, you’ll maybe get a hit!”

““Bridge timber!”” chuckled Hal. “That’s a new one!” Ginger, sitting slightly apart, grinned. Babe grinned, too.

“The old bridge timber did the trick yesterday, just the same.” Then he laughed reflectively. “Ginger was all broke up over that. He’s been after me to use one of those toothpicks, like the rest of you, and when he saw that homer he just dug his face in the dust.”

“Ginger’s dead right,” said Joe Kenton. “You’d hit three times as often if you used a light bat.”

“Sure,” agreed Dave.

“Do you fellows think so, too?” demanded Ginger eagerly.

“Of course,” replied Joe. “You’ve got the right dope, Ginger.”

“I’ll say so,” said Dave. “If Babe didn’t have a solid concrete dome, he’d know it, too.”

“Well, you can’t tell, I guess,” murmured Ginger. It was one thing for him to criticize the ways of his hero, and quite another thing to listen to some one else doing it!

“Keep your orbs on your Uncle Babe to-morrow, Ginger,” laughed the big fellow. “I’m going to show you unbelievers just what the old bat can do.”

“I—I hope you will,” muttered Ginger. “I’d like to see it.”

“You will,” answered Babe confidently. “You sure will, son, you sure will. To-morrow about this time you’ll be apologizing to me and the old bat for all the harsh words you’ve spoken, Ginger. Sack cloth and ashes for you to-morrow, son!”

“I wished I was going to be there,” said Ginger longingly. “It’ll be the first game I’ve missed since I took hold.”

“Mean to say you’re not going along?” demanded Hal, while the rest stared in surprise.

“Can’t, Cap.” Ginger shook his red head regretfully.

“Why not?” asked Babe. “Who says so?”

“Mister Naylor. He says he can’t afford to pay my fare. Course, I’d pay my own fare, only my—my dividends ain’t been comin’ in very regular lately—”

“Well, I’ll be blowed!” ejaculated Dave. “The old miser! Going to do us out of our mascot for a paltry five or six dollars! What’s it cost to get down there and back, Hal?”

“Five—something. You can’t blame Bert much, though. We haven’t begun to make expenses this spring, and Bert’s

the guy that's got to make the alibis. Still, it wouldn't hurt much to loosen up on a fiver."

"I'll say it wouldn't," declared Joe. "Look here, you know, you chaps, we've got to have Ginger! Gee, we'd get licked as sure as shooting without our mascot! Let's dig!"

"Keep your hands out of your pockets, you guys," directed Babe. "Ginger and I are pals, and I look after his finances. You be at the train promptly at nine-eighteen, son, and bring your rabbit's foot along. Something tells me we're going to need it."

"I ain't got any rabbit's foot," muttered Ginger, flushed, joyous, embarrassed, "but I—I got a lucky dime."

"Bring it, kid, bring it!" begged Dave.

The league grounds in the city were neutral territory, without a doubt; and they were also very nearly deserted territory when the game started the next day. There was a small and devoted clump of Holman's supporters back of third base and a scarcely larger company of Munson cohorts back of first. And there were some six hundred representatives of the general public scattered hither and yon about the rambling stands. It was not an inspiring scene. There was no band, there was but little cheering, there were few pennants. The general public munched peanuts and, still neutral, lolled in its seat and yawned throughout four dismal innings. It seemed that the teams were as depressed and indifferent as the bulk of the spectators. The afternoon was scorchingly, breathlessly hot, and to move from bench to plate started perspiration from every pore.

On the toss-up Holman's had won the slight advantage of last innings, and so Munson went to bat first. Dave, starting for the Light Green, held the enemy hitless until the second and scoreless until the fourth. He didn't have much trouble doing it, either, for Munson was listless and without ambition. For the Blue-and-Gold, Nelson, a left-hander also, went to the mound. Cross, Munson's best twirler, had worked in both previous games, whereas Dave had not worked since Wednesday, and some advantage was believed to accrue to Holman's from those circumstances. And yet, if Munson failed to hit Dave, so Holman's as lamentably failed to punish the Blue-and-Gold's substitute twirler. Nelson traveled scathless to the last of the fourth, but one pass and a scratch hit being scored against him. It was that fourth inning that captured the somnolent gaze of the spectators and interrupted the steady crunching of peanuts.

Munson's first man up fanned, but the next ambitiously reached for a wide one of Dave's, got it on the end of his bat and sent it arching into right field, four inches inside the foul line and out of reach of either Tom or Mac. Encouraged, the next batsman hit straight down the second base alley, and suddenly there were men on first and third and but one out! The neutrals in the stands began to take sides, and, naturally, rooted for the team that had started going and was promising to give them something for their money. The old ball park woke up from its slumbers and comparative animation reigned. Also, there was much noise from the Munson section and the Munson coaches and the Munson bench. Dave cinched his belt a notch and woke up, too. But the next batsman was a good waiter and nothing Dave pitched suited the umpire behind the plate. Most unexpectedly, as things

happen in baseball, the three bases were occupied! Moreover, the earnest-faced chap now facing Dave was Munson's clean-up man!

To pass him, mused Babe, would force in a run and still leave but one out. On the other hand, if he hit safely two tallies would come across; maybe more. He must, therefore, be induced to knock out a fly, even if it was a long one. In response to Babe's signals Dave kept them low. The first offering was a strike. The next two were balls. The fourth delivery was fouled into the first base stand. The next was a hair-breadth too low and made the tally 2 and 3. Dave had to pitch it over now, but with luck he could still work the batsman for an out. And he did, for the long fly arched down into Purves' waiting hands. The man on third raced home after the catch and beat the ball to the plate by yards. But there were two gone now and Holman's breathed easier. To the next man Dave issued the first pass and again the bases were filled. But that ended the drama, for the Munson second baseman went out, Norwin to Wentworth.

Holman's went after that one run lead in her half of the fourth and evened the score. Ted Purves flied out to center, Wentworth reached first on shortstop's error, Joe Kenton sacrificed with a slow bunt along first base line and, with Tom on second, Mac slammed out a two-bagger into center. But that one tally was all that could be had, for Bud Thomas' liner went smack into shortstop's glove.

Dave got through the fifth without much trouble, only four men facing him. Nelson wobbled a bit more, but also escaped injury, Babe fanning for the second time, Dave flying out to first and Hal Norwin knocking a weak grounder

to Nelson. In the sixth inning both pitchers became unsteady and only sharp fielding saved them. In the seventh Dave steadied down and fanned the first two aspirants. Then came a double over second base and the Munson supporters yelled hopefully. But the next man perished on a foul to Babe. The last half of the seventh witnessed the retirement of Nelson, warmly applauded by both sides, after he had been hit for a double and had passed two men. Cross, with but one down, made Dave send up a pop fly to second baseman and then crawled out of a tight hole when Captain Norwin's grounder was handled perfectly by third baseman and Mac was nailed at the plate.

Dave was threatened with disaster in the first of the eighth when, having hit the first of the enemy and sent him, nursing his elbow, to first, he passed the next opponent. A clever bunt filled the bags and things looked black for the Light Green. The succeeding play, however, resulted in an out at the plate, and then a speedy double, Norwin to Kenton to Wentworth, pulled the fat out of the fire. In the last of that inning Captain Hal, Ted Purves and Tom Wentworth went out in order, Hal third baseman to first, and the others on strikes. And, still 1 to 1, the deciding game went into the final inning.

Dave pitched real ball in that inning. Munson tried all she knew how to break through. With one down, a victim to Dave's puzzling delivery, the Munson third baseman succeeded in dropping a Texas Leaguer behind Tom Wentworth. A minute later Babe's hurried peg to second went just too wide to nip a steal. A pinch hitter took a hand then for the Blue-and-Gold, swung at a deceptive drop, knocked a foul back of third, slanted two more into the stand,

let two balls pass him and at last hit safely to short left. Then, with two on, Fortune favored the Light Green. The Munson catcher landed against Dave's first delivery—he had tried to sneak over a straight, fast one—and sent it smashing across the infield, rising as it went. The runners dashed away. Joe Kenton hurled himself high into the air and to the right, shot up a hand and speared the ball. Only the fact that when he came down he landed, or so it appeared, directly on the back of his neck, deprived him of a double play. By the time he had recovered himself and shot the ball to third base the runner there was safe. But there were two gone, now, and Holman's set herself desperately to ward off defeat. The runner on third, instigated by a coach with a voice like a load of furniture falling downstairs, cut wierd didoes on the base path, kicking up the dust, starting at top speed for the plate only to twirl and scuttle back to the bag, dancing and gyrating. None of these antics appeared to affect Dave, however. He observed the dervish-like enemy tolerantly and calmly and pitched to the batter, working slowly and carefully, digesting Babe's signals for a long moment before each wind-up. He tried a slow one that settled slowly toward the dust as it crossed the plate and was adjudged a ball. He shot a high one across the outer corner and netted a strike. He followed with a curve, waist-high, and heard it called a ball. Babe rewarded the umpire with a look of amazed pity.

“It looked good,” he confided to Dave cheeringly. “Let's have it again. Come on, Dave!” But Babe's words were belied by the signal hidden under the big mitten, and what followed was so palpably a straight ball in the groove that the batter swung smartly—and missed badly.

“Two and two!” proclaimed the official.

“Nice work, Dave!” shouted Babe. “That’s pitching, boy! One more now!”

Babe’s voice was almost drowned by the strident cries of the coaches. Even the Munson bench was howling advice and encouragement. The runner on third was for an instant still, under the conditions a suspicious circumstance and suggesting a dash for the plate on the next pitch. Dave glanced unconcernedly toward the last station, studied Babe’s signal, hesitated, shook his head. Babe signaled anew. Dave nodded. All this was merely to give the batsman something to think about besides his job of hitting the ball on the nose, for Dave seldom refused Babe’s signals, and when he did he didn’t shake his head at them but walked toward the plate and held a whispered conference with the catcher. The incident worried the coach a mite, too, and he had half a mind to cancel his signal for an attempted steal from third. But he didn’t, and as Dave’s hand holding the ball went back the runner shot for the plate.

Dave didn’t hurry his delivery, although the form of the scuttling runner was plain to his sight as his arm shot forward. The ball went true to its goal, the batter started to swing and changed his mind, the ball thudded into Babe’s mitten and the umpire swung an arm outward and backward.

“He’s out!” The runner from third slid into the base in a cloud of yellow dust, his performance a wasted effort.

In the stand the little group of Holman’s rooters stood and yelled themselves red of face, and between the plate and the Holman’s bench a youth pushed a cap to the back of his very red head and spun ecstatically on one heel.

Ginger had kept his emotions sternly in check throughout eight and a half innings, presenting a cheerful, untroubled countenance to the world, performing his duties with all his accustomed masterly efficiency. But now relief demanded expression, and he spun on a worn heel and was inarticulately joyful. Then he was at Babe's side, hand outstretched for mask and mitt, saying casually:

“Atta-boy, Babe! 'At's holding 'em!”

Babe grinned as he unbuckled the strap of his protector. “Get a good grip on your lucky dime, Ginger, and root for the old bridge timber!” said Babe.

Ginger looked startled. Gee, Babe was right, though! Joe Kenton was up, and then came Mac, Bud, and Babe. Ginger hoped hard that the needed run wouldn't depend on Babe, for Babe had faced the enemy three times and had failed on each occasion to hit. More than that, it was Cross who was now pitching, and only yesterday morning Babe had acknowledged that never yet, this year or any other, had Cross allowed him a bingle. For Cross knew Babe's weakness and didn't have to have the catcher tell him to keep them low and inside.

“Batter up!” called the umpire impatiently, and Joe, who had been listening with bent head to Coach Cousins' instructions, straightened and walked to the plate very jauntily.

“You got one comin' to you, Joe,” said Ginger, as he rescued the bat relinquished by the left fielder. “Bust it on the nose!”

CHAPTER XIX

GINGER SIGNS UP AGAIN

Ginger returned the discarded bat to the orderly array near the bench, sank to one knee beside it and watched anxiously. It was evident that Cross meant to send that game to extra innings. He was slow and canny, studying the batsman, gripping the ball with more than usual nicety. Ginger observed Joe Kenton and frowned slightly. It was plain to him that Joe had been instructed to bunt, and Ginger didn't approve of the bunting game. Of course an occasional bunt was all right, if the other fellow wasn't looking for it, or you wanted to pull a player out of position, but Ginger believed in forcing the issue, in going after the ball hard. "They'll look for a bunt and he won't have a Chinaman's chance," Ginger reflected. "That third baseman's playing in for him right now. Gee, I wish he wouldn't!" "He" in Ginger's thoughts was Joe, and not the third baseman. The boy turned and shot an almost imploring glance at Gus Cousins, but the coach's gaze was on the game. Then came the tragedy, and quite as Ginger had pictured it. Joe loosened his bat and thrust it in the path of the first delivery. The ball trickled slowly toward third. It was a nice bunt and, unexpected, might have won him first base. But the player on third came in at top speed, scooped up the rolling ball and, in the same motion, sped it to first. Joe was beaten by six feet!

One down! But Ginger maintained his cheerfulness as he took the bat from the disgusted Joe.

“Hard luck! Robbery, I call it!” Mac Torrey faced the pitcher now. Mac was no bunter, even had Gus elected to cling to the bunting game, and Ginger looked for something to happen. And as he looked his mind was busy with the future. Babe, untroubled, lolled on the bench, one big arm over Dave’s shoulders. Ginger frowned a trifle as he returned his gaze to the drama before him. If Mac got his base and Bud went out and it was up to Babe—Ginger sighed and shook his head.

One ball, and then a strike at which Mac did not offer. A second ball. Cross was working deftly and easily, very much master of the situation as it seemed. A fourth delivery sped to the plate, a lazy ball that looked good until it began to curve outward and down. Mac swung hard and missed by inches. Ginger gave a little groan and his gaze shot sideways to where Babe’s black-handled bat lay close to his hand. Then he got to his feet, unnoted by any one, probably, on field or seats, and wandered along the edge of the stand toward the nearly empty press box. Short of it, he stopped and leaned with one elbow on the edge and watched the plate while Cross’s fifth delivery was met by Mac and sent arching over the first base pavilion. Then, quite as unobtrusively as he had left his place, Ginger loitered back to the end of the bench and again subsided to a knee. And just then Mac swung innocuously and the umpire waved him away and there were two down!

“You’re next, Babe!” called the manager as Bud Thomas went to the plate. Ginger’s heart stood still for an instant and then raced very hard. He was pawing over the bats as Babe arose.

“Give us the old bridge timber, son,” said Babe cheerfully, “and rub the lucky dime!”

Ginger raised a pale countenance on which the freckles stood out with strange prominence. “It—it ain’t here, Babe,” he answered, his voice a little husky in spite of his effort to make it sound natural.

“Where is it, then?” demanded Babe, his gaze searching the ground. “What have you done with it, son?” He looked to see if by some strange chance Bud had chosen it, but Bud hadn’t. Ginger was searching behind the long bench, and under it, and around the water bucket. Others joined the search. Captain Hal bent a curious look on Ginger, which Ginger met and quickly avoided. It was Manager Naylor who suggested a solution.

“Maybe it got mixed up with their bats,” said Bert, nodding across the diamond toward the enemy headquarters. “Run over and see, Ginger.”

And Ginger very gladly went. But it wasn’t there, and he returned breathlessly to Babe and told him so. And just at that moment Bud leaned against one of Cross’s curves and the ball made a gray streak across the infield between second and third bases. Shortstop made a dive at it and knocked it down, but it was third baseman who pegged it to first a long instant after Bud had shot across the sack. Holman’s took heart and cheered and shouted, and joy reigned in all patriotic breasts save that of Babe Linder. Babe was in despair. From the umpire at the plate came the sharp admonishment “Come on! Batter up!” Babe gave a last yearning look at the array of bats spread before him and dazedly accepted the one that Ginger held forth.

“Babe,” said Ginger earnestly, “don’t swing too hard, will you? This bat’s got a lot of pep to it. Just meet ’em sharp like, Babe. Do you get me? You ain’t going to miss that other bat, honest! You—”

Babe looking down read something in Ginger’s face that made him stop on his way to the plate. “Oh,” he said softly, “so that’s it!” He was smiling, but it was a grim, tight sort of smile and Ginger’s heart sank. “This is your doings, eh? All right, Ginger, but when this game’s done I’m going to find you, and I’m going to—”

“Say!” interrupted the umpire wrathfully, “I’ll give you just ten seconds to get in the box! What do you think this is, a cricket game?”

Babe went on, parting from Ginger with one last long, meaningful look, and took his place beside the rubber. He was exceedingly angry as he set his feet well apart and squared himself to the plate. The ridiculous thing in his hands had no weight, no substance, as he swung it back and waited. He felt helpless, as helpless as Hercules himself might have felt if some one had stolen his good old club and substituted a willow wand!

“Lose your bat?” inquired the Munson catcher affably as he straightened up after giving his signal.

“Yes,” growled Babe morosely. “Some murdering thief—”

But there wasn’t time for more, because a grayish-white object came speeding toward him. Babe kept his eyes on it until it became a blur to his vision, but made no offer at it. It was much too low; way under his knees, and—

“*Stuh-rike!*” intoned the umpire. Babe turned upon him indignantly.

“*What?*” he demanded, outraged.

There was no reply beyond a baleful glance from the cold gray eyes of the official. Babe grunted, waved that useless weapon twice across the plate and grimly set himself again. From the bench came encouraging advice. “Make him pitch to you, Babe!” “It only takes one, old son!” “Let’s have it, Babe! You’re better than he is!” A palpable ball went past, but Babe breathed easier when the umpire called it by its right name. Cross pegged twice to first, where Bud was taking long chances on the path to second, got no results and again gave his attention to Babe. Then the signal came and Babe’s big fingers clutched more tightly about the inadequate handle of the toy weapon. The ball sped toward him and Bud started, hot foot, for second. Babe swung, putting all his force of weight and muscle into action. The infield was shouting loudly as Babe’s bat, meeting no opposition, swung right on around, taking Babe with it. Then the Munson catcher stepped forward and threw, straight and true but high, to shortstop. Ball and Bud reached the bag at the same instant, but Bud was saved by the fraction of time required by the shortstop to bring the ball from above his head to the level of his shoe tops. Holman’s cheered, Bud arose carefully and patted a cloud of dust from his togs and Cross viewed the runner venomously ere he stepped back into the box.

Two strikes and one ball, reflected Babe. He had forgotten to allow for the difference in the weight of his bat that time and had swung too soon. It had been a good ball, if a trifle lower than Babe liked them, and he would have got it if he

hadn't been too quick. But what could you do with a matchstick, anyway? What was it Ginger had said? "That bat's got a lot of pep to it. Just meet 'em sharp like." Drat the red-headed little rascal! Maybe his advice was good, though. Babe guessed it was. Maybe, next time, if he held back a little—

The next time came. Cross had balls to spare, but something whispered to Babe that the long-legged pitcher was eager to end the innings, that he meant to close the incident with his next delivery. Babe had forgotten his anger now. He was the old calm, cool-headed Babe. Something of his accustomed confidence returned as he narrowed his eyes slightly and poised that inadequate bat. Cross stepped forward, his hand shot toward the plate, the ball sped from it, grew bigger, hung for a brief moment in air as though motionless and then was at the plate.

"Just meet it sharp!" said Babe to himself. Then his bat swept around in what for Babe was scarcely more than a half-swing, there was a sharp *crack*, and ball and batsman were off at the same instant. And so was Bud, his legs twinkling as he sped for third. The ball streaked, low and at lightning speed, straight across the base line midway between first and second. After its passage first baseman and second baseman picked themselves up from the turf and raced to their bags. In right field a frantic player cupped his hands before the rolling ball, straightened and threw desperately to the plate. But Bud's spikes spurned the rubber just as the ball began its long bound, and before the sphere had settled into the catcher's mitten Holman's shouts proclaimed victory and Bud, breathless but happy, was

fighting his way to the bench through a mob of frantic friends.

Half an hour later, seated beside Babe on the dusty red velvet of a day-coach, Ginger was making confession. “It was an awful nervy thing to do, Babe, but, gee, I just had to! Honest, I did, Babe! Look at the fix we was in. We only needed the one run to cop the game, didn’t we? And you ain’t never come through in the pinches with that bat, Babe, have you? Didn’t you say yourself that you ain’t never made a hit off that Cross guy? Sure, you did! I just knew you’d go in there and try to slug out a homer, if you had that big club, Babe, and we didn’t need no homer to win, see? All we needed was just a nice little hit, Babe, like a fellow would make if he just took a short swing and hit the old apple clean. So I says ‘If he don’t have the old bridge timber he’ll have to use one of the other bats, and maybe thataway he’ll come through.’ And so when you wasn’t lookin’ I hid the old blackjack in the stand. Believe me, I was scared! And if—”

“Believe me,” interrupted Babe very, very fiercely, “you had a right to be scared, for I certainly intended to crown you for fair, son!”

Ginger grinned and edged a wee bit closer to the big chap. “Aw, gee,” he said, “I wasn’t caring about no lickin’, Babe. What I was scared of was maybe you wouldn’t make no hit, after all! But you did, didn’t you, Babe?”

“Sure did,” agreed Babe cheerfully.

“An’—” Ginger’s tone became insinuating—“an’, say, Babe, them light bats ain’t so worse, are they?”

Babe turned a stern countenance on the criminal. “Lay off that, son, lay off,” he replied. “That bat did the trick for me that time, all right. But, as you said to me not so long ago, Ginger, that don’t prove nothing, nothing at all!”

But Ginger, catching the twinkle in Babe’s eyes, thought differently.

The team’s banquet was held at Mander’s Chesapeake Oyster House, in the upstairs room where the ceiling was so low that Babe threatened to bring down the plaster whenever he stood up. All the players were there, and the Coach and the Manager and the Assistant Manager and—Ginger! Ginger was there, of course, in his official position of Mascot, and just at first he was far too embarrassed to take joy from the occasion. But he pulled himself together, in a way of speaking, along about the second course and, perhaps just to prove that he was quite accustomed to banquets—which of course he wasn’t—he finished strong, eating his own three-colored ice cream and Babe’s and Ted Purves’.

Naturally, Ginger had no vote in the election which followed, though it is likely enough that he, too, would have cast his vote for Joe Kenton. Joe, however, didn’t need any more votes than he got on the first and only ballot taken, for his election was unanimous. Hal, privileged as retiring captain to nominate a successor, said so many splendid things about his chum that Joe got very red in the face and looked extremely unhappy until the last cheer for the new leader had died away. Later they sang some songs and felt a trifle sentimental, especially fellows who, like Babe and Hal, wouldn’t be there next year, and at last the banquet came to an end. Many of the fellows seized on suitcases and hurried

off for the late train. Others, Joe and Hal and Babe amongst them, went slowly back to school through the warm June night. Ginger, loath to see the last of his friend and hero, tagged along at Babe's side, and when Routledge was reached allowed himself to be persuaded to ascend to Number 14.

Up there, with the windows open and coats off, they sat and talked long. No one, it seemed, was sleepy even when eleven o'clock struck. But Ginger pulled himself from Babe's side and said he guessed he'd have to be getting along or the old man would whale the hide off him! They shook hands very gravely with him and Joe said: "Well, see you next year, Ginger."

Then, to the others' surprise, Ginger shook his head. "I don't guess you will," he said gruffly.

"What!" exclaimed Babe. "Going to desert us?"

"Aw, you won't be here," answered Ginger, his gaze on the floor.

"Why, no, old man, I won't, but Joe will, and a lot of the others. Great Scott, kid, you can't desert the old team like that!"

"Of course you can't," said Joe. "Besides, Ginger, it's pretty likely that Babe'll be back here now and then, and if you want to see him you'd better hang about the old field. And, gee, Ginger, I was counting on your help! It isn't going to be any easy job next year, with so many of the old players gone, and—well, I'm going to need you, Ginger."

Ginger hesitated, looked at Joe, darted a glance at Babe and at last spoke.

“Aw, all right,” he said. “I’ll see the old team through another season.”

CHAPTER XX

CALLED TO THE COLORS

In September Joe was back again at Holman's, three months older, nearly an inch taller than he had been the preceding fall and a good eight pounds heavier than when he had left school in June. Some of those eight pounds, he knew, would come off when he began running the bases in fall practice, but he earnestly hoped that most of them would stay with him. As Hal was no longer there, and, since he was now a senior, he was privileged to room in the senior dormitory. He had applied for and been assigned one of the front studies in Levering Hall. But in July his plans had been changed. A wierdly scrawled letter from Gus Billings, written in a Maine camp, had reached him toward the last of that month. Gus, himself now without a roommate, proposed that Joe share Number 10 Puffer. "Maybe it isn't as fussy as Levering," wrote Gus, "but it's a good old dive and I'd rather stay there next year than change, and you'd like it, I'll bet, if you tried it." So Joe joined forces with the big, good-natured football captain, taking over Babe Linder's half of the quarters and becoming heir to one frayed bath towel, a half-filled bottle of witch-hazel and the remains of what had once been a blue gymnasium shirt, these articles being discovered in various out-of-the-way corners.

Joe missed Hal Norwin a good deal for the first few days of the new term, but after that there was scarcely time to miss any one. Fall baseball practice began on the second day and

Joe was busy. He and Gus got on beautifully right from the start. Any fellow, though, could get on with Gus, so that was no great credit to Joe. Gus was even busier than Joe, and, as football leader, was facing far more responsibility. Until well into October Joe knew but little of the football situation. Gus spoke of it frequently enough, but Joe's attention was generally perfunctory. Then, one evening Gus sprang a surprise.

“Say, how much longer are you going to waste your time with that gang of morons?” he asked. “Moron” was a new word with Gus, and he loved it. Joe simulated perplexity.

“Morons, Gus? Why, I'm not on the eleven!”

“No, but you ought to be,” growled Gus. “Look here, Joseph, we were talking about you this afternoon, Rusty and I, and we decided you'd have to come out.”

“Play football? Not on your life! Listen, Gus, I've got all the trouble I want right now. You and Rusty want to forget it!”

“Can't be done. We need you. We're short of men, as you know, and—”

“I didn't know it,” exclaimed Joe suspiciously.

“Well, you would have if you'd heard what I've been telling you every day for three weeks! We've got a punk lot of backfield stuff, and we need more. We—”

“Thanks,” laughed Joe.

“We need more men, I mean. You've played two years already, Joe, and you know a lot more than some of those

new morons that are trying for jobs. You'd be a lot of good out there if you'd come. How about it?"

"But I can't, Gus! Who's going to look after the baseball gang? There's a good fortnight of practice ahead yet. Of course, after that, if you still insist, I'll be glad to join your crowd of roughnecks. Just the same, I don't see what use I can be. You know mighty well I'm no football player. I proved that last year, and—"

"How come? Look at what you did in the Mills game. Made every score yourself—"

"Shut up! I'm a dub at football, and every one knows it. What are you and Rusty trying to do, anyway? String me?"

"Not a bit of it, Joe, honest. Listen. Rusty says you'd probably get a place this year if you tried hard. After all, experience is what counts, and you've had two years of it. And you're a mighty clever guy when it comes to running, Joe. You're fast and you can dodge like a rabbit."

"Yes, maybe. And I can get the signals twisted and I can score as well for the other fellow as for us! I'm a plain nitwit at football, Gus, old darling, and you ought to know it. So had Rusty. Besides—" and Joe grinned—"what would I want to play any more for? I've got my letter, haven't I?"

"Letter?" said Gus. "You've got three of 'em; baseball, football and hockey. If it comes to that, what do you want to play any more baseball for?"

"Oh, that's different. I'm captain, you see."

"Sure. And I'm football captain. So you ought to play football."

The logic wasn't quite clear to Joe, but he didn't challenge it. He only shook his head again. "Anything to oblige you, Gus, but my duty is with the baseball crowd just now."

"What's the matter with letting Prince attend to 'em? What's fall practice amount to, anyway? Any one can stand around and see that those guys get enough work. The job doesn't need you. Besides, you could look 'em over now and then, couldn't you?"

"But, my dear, good Gustavus," protested Joe, "what's the big idea? You've got Dave Hearn and Johnny Sawyer for half-backs, and maybe six or eight others, haven't you? Why pick on me?"

"Sure, we've got Dave and Johnny and a fellow named Leary, a new guy, but that's all we have got. The rest are a total loss. You know mighty well three half-backs aren't enough to carry a team through a whole season. Johnny's a fine plunger, a rattling guy for the heavy and rough business, but he's as slow as cold cream when it comes to running. Dave's good; he's fine; but we need a couple others. You're one of 'em. When do you start?"

Joe laughed impatiently. "I don't start, you old idiot. I've told you I can't."

"Bet you you do," replied Gus, untroubledly.

"Well, I'll bet I don't! At any rate, not until fall baseball's through." There was a moment's silence during which Joe found his place in the book he had been studying. Then he added: "I'm sorry, Gus, of course, but you see how it is."

"I thought you liked football," said Gus. "You were crazy about it last fall."

“I do like it. I’m crazy about it yet, I guess, even if I’ve proved to myself that I’m no player, but—”

“And now, just when you’re practically certain of making the team, you quit!”

“Practically certain of—say, are you crazy?”

“Well, aren’t you? You’re captain of the baseball team, aren’t you? Well, you ought to know what that means. If I went out for baseball next spring don’t you think I’d find a place, even if I was fairly punk? Sure, I would. Just because I’m football captain. Well, it works the other way, too, doesn’t it? Any coach will stretch a point to find a place for a fellow who’s captain in another sport. Rusty as good as said this afternoon that you’d get placed if you came out. Of course, that doesn’t mean that you’d play all the time, but you’d get a good show and you’d be sure of playing against Munson for a while anyway.”

“I call that a pretty sick piece of business,” replied Joe disgustedly. “And if you think it works always, why, you just try for the nine next spring! You’ll have a fat chance of making it if you can’t play real baseball, Gus!”

“Maybe,” chuckled Gus, “but if you left it to the coach he’d look after me all right!”

“Well, I don’t want a place on the football team that I don’t earn. And you can tell Rusty so, too. I’m not coming out, Gus, but if I did I wouldn’t take any favors like that. That’s—that’s crazy!”

“Well, don’t get excited,” said Gus soothingly. “We’ll let you earn your place, Joe.”

“You bet you will—when you get the chance!”

Joe resolutely cupped his chin in his palms and fixed his eyes on the book. Gus smiled tolerantly, sighed and drew his own work toward him.

Two days later Joe reported for football.

There didn't seem to be anything else to do. The coach talked to three or four of the leading members of the nine and convinced them that Captain Kenton was needed on the gridiron. Then he talked to Joe. Rusty was a forceful talker, even if his vocabulary wasn't large, and at the end of half an hour he had Joe teetering. And then when the latter, having exhausted all the objections he could think of, fell back on Charlie Prince and others of the last year crowd for support they deserted him utterly. Charlie expressed amazement that Joe should even hesitate. He said it was a question of patriotism, a call to the colors, and a lot more, and Joe surrendered. Charlie took over the running of the baseball team and Joe, delighted as soon as he was once convinced, donned canvas again.

So far Holman's had journeyed a rough path. She had played four games and won two of them. She had had her big moments, when it had seemed to coach and players and spectators that the Light Green was due for another successful season, with Munson's scalp hanging from her belt in November, but there had been other moments not so grand. Saarsburg had fairly overwhelmed her in the third contest of the season, Holman's playing football that might easily have disgraced a grammar school team. Some laid that to the fact that the thermometer hovered around eighty; but it wasn't to be denied that it was just as hot for the visiting

crowd, and Rusty, the red-headed Holman's coach, chewed his gum very fast and swallowed a lot of things he wanted to say. Then, just to show what she could do, the Light Green took Center Hill Academy into camp to the tune of 23 to 0; and Center Hill was no infant at the pigskin game! And three days after that Joe Kenton joined his fortunes with Gus and Tom Meadows and Slim Porter and the others and contentedly, if dubiously, proceeded to do his bit.

It wasn't much of a bit at first. He was football stale and it took many days to get back into the rut again. Rusty gave him plenty of work and plenty of opportunities, trying him out for a week on the scrubs and then shifting him over to the first as a first-choice substitute. He got into the Mills game for some twenty minutes and, perhaps because Mills this year was only about fifty per cent of the team she had been last, he was fairly successful in making gains outside of tackle. Holman's won without much effort, 19 to 0. Afterwards, Gus tried to tell Joe that he had played a corking game, but Joe knew better.

"Talk sense," he protested. "If we'd been playing Munson, or even Glenwood, I wouldn't have made fifteen yards this afternoon. With you and Barrows boxing that end any one could have got his distance. And I mighty nigh got the signals mixed again that time on their sixteen yards when Sanford sent Leary into the line. I was within an ace of going after the ball myself. If Leary hadn't started a split-second before I could get going I'd have gummed the game finely! No, sir, Gus, I'm no pigskin wonder, and I know it. I love the pesky old game and I'll play it as long as you and Rusty can stand me, but I haven't any whatyoucallems—any delusions of greatness."

“I don’t say you’re a great player,” demurred Gus, “but you got away fast and clean to-day, and you follow the ball, Joe. If there’s one thing I admire more than anything else in a football guy it’s that. I’m a prune, myself, at it. I never could keep my eyes on the old leather, and I’ve missed more tackles and fell over my own feet oftener than you could count just for that reason. Yes, sir, you follow the ball, and I sure like that, Joe.”

“Oh, well, maybe so, but that doesn’t make me a player. Any one can watch the pigskin and see where it’s going—or coming. And, of course, if you know where it is you stand a fair chance of getting the runner. But what I mean is that—that oh, I don’t know!” Joe sighed. “I guess it just comes down to this, Gus. Some fellows have football intelligence and a lot more haven’t. And I’m one of the haven’t!”

“Well, keep the old shirt on,” counseled Gus. “You’re doing fine. I wouldn’t wonder if we managed to use you a whole lot against Munson. They say she’s got only a fair line this year, and a slow backfield, and you ought to be able to get going once at least; and when you do get started, Joseph, you’re hard to stop.”

“A slow backfield!” jeered Joe. “Where do you get that stuff? Munson’s still got Taylor, and he’s fast enough for half a dozen backs!”

“Yeah, but the rest are big chaps and don’t handle themselves very quick. Anyway, that’s the dope we get. Rusty’s aiming to put a fast team against ’em, and that’s why I guess you’ll get a good share of work the day we meet ’em. You keep right on the way you’re headed, old son, and no one’ll do any kicking. And keep your eye on the ball just like

you're doing. You sure do make a hit with me in that way, Joe!"

"Well, it's nice to know there's one thing I do decently," answered Joe, still deeply pessimistic. "Too bad there isn't a twelfth position on a football team, Gus. I might get on the All-American as ball-follower!"

Gus grinned and muttered something as he lounged through the door. It sounded like "moron."

The Mills game marked the end of the preliminary season. The four games that remained, excepting, perhaps, that with Wagnalls, a week before the final test, were serious affairs; and only the most optimistic Holman's supporters could figure wins for the Light Green in more than two of them; and sometimes those two didn't include the Munson contest! Rusty had stopped experimenting now and, barring accidents, the line-up for the Louisburg game would be the line-up that faced Munson. One thing that worried all who dared hope for a victory over the Blue and Gold was the fact that in all the seventeen years that Holman's and Munson had met on the gridiron never had the former won two successive contests. Munson had beaten her rival two years running twice, but such glory had yet to fall to Holman's. Holman's had won last fall, and while there was, of course, absolutely nothing in this superstition stuff—well, there it was! Even Captain Gus, who had as little imagination as any one could have, was secretly oppressed, although publicly, if any one referred to the subject, he laughed scornfully and declared that fellows who put any faith in that sort of dope were morons!

What Rusty thought no one knew. Rusty kept right on working hard with such material as Fate had willed to him, a dogged, determined, generally cheerful Rusty who was well liked by all hands and who, knowing what his charges didn't know, was working for more than a victory over the ancient rival. What he knew and the fellows didn't—or, if they did know, had forgotten—was that his four-year term as coach expired this fall, and that, since like any general, he was judged by results, whether his contract was renewed would depend a very great deal on whether Holman's or Munson emerged from the fast approaching battle with the long end of the score. During Rusty's regime the Light Green had lost two Munson games and won one, and, although Rusty might well have cited extenuating circumstances to account for the first defeat, he realized fully that another reversal would probably send him looking for a new position. So the little coach worked hard, perhaps harder than he ever had worked, and with material that, to say the best of it, was only average. If he had had last year's team Rusty wouldn't have worried much, but he hadn't. What he had was only little more than half as good as last year's, and so, not infrequently, Rusty did worry. But few ever knew it.

The Louisburg game proved a tragedy both to the team and to Joe; but especially to Joe. Johnny Sawyer, playing right half, got a twisted ankle early in the first period and, for some reason known only to Rusty, Joe, instead of Leary, was sent in to replace him. Joe had never been able to do as well at right half as at left; nor did he play as well under Clinker's leadership as under Sanford's. To-day it was the substitute quarter who had started, Sanford being reserved for the last half. Things broke wrong for Joe on the very first play, which

was a fullback buck through right of center. Instead of going into the line outside his right tackle as he should have, Joe dashed straight for the center-guard hole. He beat Brill, the fullback, to it, but Joe was too light for the job of cleaning the hole out, and when Brill slammed in behind him the enemy defense had flocked to the point of attack and the result was a three-yard loss for Holman's. Joe emerged rather the worse for wear and as yet unconscious of his error. Clinker, ably assisted by Brill, informed him of it. There wasn't much time for explanations, but the two did wonders, and Joe, very sick and miserable, would have crawled out of sight if that had been possible.

He partly redeemed himself a few minutes later by a lucky catch of the ball when it bounced from Barrow's hands after a forward pass. But he laid that to luck and nothing else, and found no comfort. Twice he was stopped on plays around his right, once for a four-yard loss. It wasn't his day, and he was convinced of it, and he played as one who was convinced. On defense he was not so bad, but Rusty wisely took him out at the end of the quarter. Joe went over to the gymnasium certain that he was disgraced. He didn't return for the rest of the game, and what happened he learned from Gus later. After holding Holman's scoreless during the first two periods, Louisburg opened up a whole bag of tricks and, taking the offensive, slammed the opponents around cruelly, putting two touchdowns across and adding a field goal for good measure. The score was 16 to 0. Gus was still dazed when he told the story.

"We simply went to pieces, Joe, the whole kit and caboodle of us. Why, even Ferris was up in the air. Twice he passed over Brill's head. The rest of us were just as bad. I

was rotten. I don't know what happened! We played like a lot of—of morons!”

CHAPTER XXI

JOE FOLLOWS THE BALL

That evening Joe sought out Rusty in his room in the village. “I guess I might as well quit,” he said. “I’m no good at it, Rusty, and there’s no sense in my taking the place of some fellow who can play better. You and Gus have been mighty decent, but I said when I started that I didn’t want the job if I couldn’t earn it, and I haven’t. I’ve heard more or less talk, too. Some fellows say I’m on just because I’m rooming with Gus, or because I’m baseball captain. Well, I’d rather they didn’t think that.”

“What are you trying to do?” asked Rusty. “Resign?”

“Yes.” Joe smiled and added: “Before I’m fired.”

“Well, your resignation isn’t accepted, Kenton.”

Joe observed the coach doubtfully. “But—but I’m in earnest,” he protested. “It’s fine of you to be willing to put up with me, Rusty, but I—I don’t want you to think that you’ve got to—that is, that you’re under any obligation to find a place for me on the eleven.”

“Obligation be blowed,” said Rusty. “What are you talking about, anyway? I don’t get you, Kenton.”

“Why, what I mean is—look here, Rusty. You know that if I wasn’t baseball captain I’d have been let out two weeks ago. Well, I don’t want to play football enough to keep my place by favor, and so—”

“Oh, that’s it,” interrupted Rusty. “I get you now. So you think I’m nursing you along because you’re baseball captain, eh?”

“Well,” answered Joe, smiling, but uneasy because of a sudden setting of Rusty’s face, “it’s done, isn’t it?”

Rusty shook his head, his mouth drawn to a grim line.

“Not this fall, Kenton,” he said.

Joe stared back a moment, and then, as Rusty said no more, laughed perplexedly. “Well—” he began vaguely.

“When you aren’t any more use to the team, Kenton,” announced the coach quietly, “I’ll tell you. But you wait until I do. If every one of that bunch who played ragged this afternoon came to me and resigned I wouldn’t have any team to-morrow. Good night.”

Joe, still perplexed although greatly relieved, went back and reported the conversation to Gus. Gus called him a moron.

A week later Holman’s came back and played a very decent game against the State Aggies team of husky, rangy veterans. She was beaten, but only by a matter of two inches. Which is to say that if Brill’s second attempt at a goal after touchdown had sent the pigskin two inches higher it would have bounded over the bar instead of under. As it was, the final score was 14 to 13, and as Holman’s had never hoped for better than a tied score the result was accepted philosophically. Joe played fairly well during the twenty-odd minutes that he was in; rather better on defense than on attack, although he did get away once for a twelve-yard run that for the moment made him look almost like a real football

player. One thing he did to the King's taste—and Gus's—was to follow the ball, which accounted for the fact that he had several fine tackles to his credit. Joe was not a little set up that evening, although he tried not to let the fact be known. Gus, who was in a jovial and expansive mood as a result of having more than outplayed his opponent, insisted that Joe was every bit as good as Hearn and “a blamed sight better than all the other subs!” Joe was pleased, but sprinkled quite a quantity of salt on the avowal.

There was a week of extremely hard work before the Wagnalls game. Rusty called always for speed and more speed. You simply couldn't satisfy him, it seemed, and when practice was over the walk to the gymnasium was ten miles long! But the Light Green certainly showed improvement by the end of that week. Plays went off more smoothly and a lot faster, and it did seem as though the team had at last really found itself. In the Wagnalls game Joe made his first touchdown, slipping around his own right end behind the entire backfield and getting free when Sawyer, playing right half, dumped the opposing end. Joe started his run from the enemy's twenty-seven and had no opposition, once past the line, save from the Wagnalls quarter. Joe outguessed that youth very neatly and eluded a desperate tackle, taking the ball over for the second score of the game to the plaudits of the Holman's rooters. The game was one-sided from the start and the home team hung up five touchdowns for a grand total of 34 points while Wagnalls was scoring 7. Joe stayed in a full half and, save that he once got his signals twisted, comported himself very well. Even his one lapse went unpenalized since, more by luck than skill, he got enough ground to make it first down again.

Then, almost before any one realized it, it was Thursday and the last practice was over and nothing was left to do save sit tight and wait for the big adventure.

Of course there were drills on Friday, both in the afternoon and evening, but they were designed more to keep the fellows from getting “edgy” than to impart instruction. Friday evening Rusty turned from the blackboard, dusted the chalk from his hands and spoke for ten minutes very earnestly. What he said was about what all coaches have said on the eve of big games since coaches and big games have been. Followed some rather hysterical cheering and then twenty-six lads went back to the dormitories and wooed slumber. Needless to say, a good many of the number found slumber not easily won. Rather to his surprise, however, Joe fell asleep soon after his head touched the pillow, beating Gus by a good half-hour.

Munson came in numbers, waving blue-and-gold pennants and cheering lustily as they took possession of the village. The invaders appeared very certain of themselves, Joe thought, and his own confidence lessened appreciably. Even when Gus, viewing the enemy from the steps of Puffer, scathingly disposed of them as “a bunch of morons” Joe couldn’t quite get back his last night’s serenity.

Munson kicked off promptly at two o’clock and Sanford fumbled the ball on Holman’s sixteen yards, where an enemy end fell on it. It took Munson just seven plays to put the pigskin over and hang up six points to her credit. Holman’s was so overcome by the initial disaster that her efforts to stop the enemy’s charges were almost pathetic. Munson missed the goal by inches, and Holman’s, taking what comfort she

could, cheered long and loud. Joe watched that first half of the game from the bench, Dave Hearn playing left half, and Leary right. After that first score neither goal line was seriously threatened until the second period was well along. Holman's, recovering from her shock, beat back two invasions of her territory short of the thirty-yard line and finally started one of her own. It looked good until it approached the opposite thirty. Then it slowed and faltered and, after Brill had failed to get the ball to Ted Lord on a forward pass, Sanford sacrificed two yards to get the pigskin in front of the Munson goal. Brill tried a placement from the thirty-three, but the ball went far short. Munson didn't force the playing after that, but kicked on second down and was content to let the score stay as it was until half-time. Twice, however, Holman's started off for the enemy goal and made good going until well past midfield. There the attack invariably petered out, for the Munson line was strong and steady. Barring that first misadventure and its result, the opposing teams played very evenly. If Munson's backfield was as slow as Gus had predicted—and hoped—the fact was not very evident in that half of the contest. Nor was the Light Green backfield at all dazzling in its movements. An unbiased observer would probably have said that neither team was playing within thirty per cent of its best, and he would have been close to the facts. The second quarter ended with the ball in Munson's possession on her own forty-four yards.

In the locker room at the gymnasium, above the *slap-slap* of the rubbers, Rusty's voice dominated everything, save, perhaps, the pungent odor of rubbing alcohol and linament, during the last three minutes of half-time. Rusty had finished

with criticism and instruction. Now he was talking straight from the shoulder. It was old stuff, but it sounded new and wonderful, and some of the younger fellows choked while they listened and clenched their hands and set their young mouths sternly. Rusty didn't get "sloppy," but he certainly had them swallowing hard toward the end and sent them back fighting hot.

As I've said before, there was more in it for Rusty than a mere victory over the hereditary enemy, and any man who won't fight hard for his job doesn't deserve to hold it!

Joe took Hearn's place at left half and Sawyer went in at right end instead of Leary. Slim Porter, who had been removed in the first period after some one had stepped ungently on his nose, was reinstated, well taped of countenance. Otherwise the line-up was the same as had ended the first half. It took four minutes for Holman's to recover the pigskin after the kick-off. Then Sawyer pulled down a punt and was toppled over on his twenty-one yards after a six-yard dash. Holman's played better ball then and played it faster. Sanford abandoned his safety first policy and called for plays that were ordinarily held back for desperate moments. For a time they went well, for Munson found it hard to realize that the enemy had really cut loose from the former old-style "hit-the-wall" plays. When she awoke Holman's was on her thirty-five-yards and still coming. But nothing came of that advance in the end. Some one was caught off-side and the invader was set back five yards. [Then Hap Ferris made a low pass to Sawyer](#) and the best Sawyer could do was make it safe for an eight-yard loss. In the end Brill again tried a place-kick and again failed, and the ball was Munson's on her twenty.

Joe had taken his share of the work and had been as successful as Sawyer, but his gains had been short. Getting away from the Munson secondary defense was not an easy feat. Always he was nabbed after three yards or four, or, as on one memorable occasion, seven. The third quarter wore toward its end without more scoring. Once Munson tried a desperate drop-kick from the thirty-two yards, but it went wide. With four minutes of that third period left, however, the unexpected happened.

Munson had slipped in two substitutes, a right guard and a left half-back, and, not to be outdone, Rusty had responded by replacing Ferris with Halliday at center. Hap had been used rather roughly, if one judged by appearances! Munson had the ball on Holman's forty-two yards on second down when the unexpected came to pass. She had made a scant two past Captain Gus and now she was evidently aiming at the same place. But the new half-back, fresh from the bench, a rangy, tow-headed lad just oozing enthusiasm, muffed the pass. There was a frenzied shriek of "*Ball! Ball!*" and a wild scramble at the left of the enemy line. Then Joe ducked through on the other side, past a guard whose attention had momentarily strayed, gathered the trickling oval up from under the feet of the enemy and—went back again!

Going back again was a masterpiece of subtle strategy, for he was aided by the selfsame guard who, finding an enemy inside his territory, promptly thrust him toward whence he had come, failing to observe until too late the fact that the enemy was taking the ball with him! Once free from the guard's attentions, Joe dug his cleats and left the locality just as fast as his legs would let him, which was quite fast. When the lost ball was at last discovered, which was within a much

shorter period of time than has been consumed in telling it, it was well on its way toward the Munson goal line. Joe had cleared the enemy right end unchallenged. Confusion and pandemonium reigned, and twenty-one players and at least two officials did their level best to catch up with Joe. But that was rather a hopeless undertaking, for Joe had secured a fine start. When he crossed the goal line, after a brisk dash of fifty-odd yards, he was practically unattended. There was a great deal of shouting going on as Joe breathlessly placed the pigskin on the ground and draped himself about it.

Various green-stockinged youths pounded or squeezed from Joe's body what little breath remained in it, and then Gus had his go and babbled something about "following-the-ball-I'll-say-so-what-do-you-know-about-it-you-old-thief-eh!" And all the while he whanged Joe on the back and grinned from ear to ear. Then comparative silence fell while Brill tried to boot the pigskin over the bar for the much-needed one point and the Munson crowd came charging through and spoiled the whole business! That was disappointing, but at least the score was even and there was still another period. Joe was glad when the quarter ended a minute later, for he could rinse out his mouth at the water pail and get some air back into his lungs.

Ten minutes later, or maybe eleven—I am speaking of playing and not elapsed time—it had become generally accepted that 6 to 6 was to be the final score of that game. Each side was trying hard to be philosophical and keep in sight the fact that a tied score was better any day than a defeat. One thing had been shown very conclusively, which was that, eliminating accidents, neither team was able to score against the other. Each might advance the ball to its

opponent's thirty-five or even thirty, but beyond that point there was no going. Of course accidents had happened and might happen again, but one couldn't depend on them. Since the last period had started there had been several fumbles and near fumbles, for each team was now leavened with second and third-string players, but the resultant advantages to the opponent had been slight. There had been penalties inflicted, too, but they had been inflicted impartially. So far as present results went, Holman's and Munson were just where they had been when they started, absolutely even. Some fifty-five minutes of playing time had brought advantage to neither the Light Green or the Blue and Gold.

Joe was still in, and so was Sawyer, but Brill had gone and Sanford had gone and there were two substitutes on the ends and three strange backs between them. Both teams were still fighting hard and desperately, but they were slowing up fast. Under Clinker's leadership Holman's lacked its former aggressiveness and even Gus's husky imploring couldn't put speed into the Light Green. There was a good deal of punting now and many rather hopeless attempts at forward passes. Most of the latter grounded, but finally Clinker did get a short heave over the center of the line to his right end and the latter made a half dozen strides before he was obliterated. That put the ball on Munson's forty-eight. Joe tried a run outside his own left tackle and was stopped and Sawyer got three through the center. Then Sawyer failed to gain and Norman, who had taken Brill's job, punted over the goal line. Some one proclaimed three minutes to play as Munson lined up on her twenty. One easily stopped plunge at the left of center, and Munson booted from her ten-yard line. It was a short punt and it went out at the thirty-seven. The Holman's

stands came to life again with a hoarse cheer of triumph. Norman got a scant yard and Sawyer took two. Then Joe scampered wide around his right and added two more before he was run out of bounds. It was fourth down and, since Norman was no field-goal kicker, he punted from near the forty. By some freak of fortune the ball went the whole way and again fell behind the goal line, and again Munson touched it back and brought it out to her twenty. The time keeper said one minute and forty seconds.

Well, much may happen in one and two-thirds minutes, and in this particular one and two-thirds minutes much did. Munson decided to take no risk and her left half went back to kicking position. Very, very desperately Holman's strove to break through and block that punt, but just as desperately the Blue-and-Gold line held her off. Yet the Holman's determination had its effect. The enemy center passed low and the punter was hurried. The ball went high in the air and there a vagrant breeze took it and wafted it back toward the Munson goal. When it descended it was no further from where it had begun its flight than the twenty-five-yard line. It was Norman who claimed it, although half the Holman's players might have caught it as easily. The Munson ends, indeed most of the Munson team, were waiting to down the catcher. Which was friend and which was enemy was very hard to determine in that moment. Then the ball came down, lazily, turning end over end. Norman stepped back a foot or so, ready to seize it and plunge ahead. Perhaps he thought too much of the plunge and not enough of the catch, for the ball came down not into his hands but against his shoulder. From there it arched to the left, well out of the congested district, on a ten-yard flight.

Joe had been watching the ball quite as attentively as any one, perhaps more attentively since watching the ball had become something of a habit with him, but he had not pushed into the mêlée. Instead, he was well to the left of it, and from there he was better able to follow the ball's supplementary flight. Consequently, when he saw it coming in his direction he met it half way. He didn't have to fight for its possession, for the nearest claimant was fully three yards distant when he wrapped his hands about it. Between him and the goal lay some twenty-seven yards and, theoretically speaking, eleven enemies. Actually only about half that number were in position to dispute his passage, but they were earnest and determined, and Joe's work was cut out for him. He sidestepped one, and then another. One of his own team disposed of a third and then Joe was dodging this way and that, now perilously close to the side line, but always going ahead and putting one white streak after another behind him.

He was close to the ten when disaster almost overtook him in the shape of a hurtling Munson Lineman. If the enemy had come at him in less haste the result might have been different. As it was, the Munson fellow's idea appeared to be to knock Joe flat by the force of the concussion and make his tackle afterwards. That is where he made his mistake, for, although they met and Joe staggered from the impact, the latter avoided more than half the force of the other's body by spinning on his heel. There was one second of suspense after that when Joe felt a hand at his ankle, but he was able to pull away before the clutching fingers found a hold. Then the enemy was all about him, it seemed, and he had the ball against the pit of his stomach, his head down and his feet pushing the last few yards of trampled turf behind him. The

truth is that, at the end, there were far more friends than foes around him, and that Joe's final heroic effort to cross the line was made with Gus Billings fairly butting him on! But cross it he did, and that is the main thing!

And while Holman's went crazy with joy and flocked, dancing and cavorting, along the side line, while Joe fought for breath that wouldn't come, while cheers for the Light Green assaulted the sky, Norman, who had seldom if ever kicked a goal in all his life, now, just because no one cared whether he succeeded or didn't, sent the pigskin over the bar as prettily as if the game depended on it!

There were many happy persons around school that evening. There was the whole student body in general, and there were the members of the team in particular. And then there was Gus, who declared a great many times that any one who had ever said that Joe wasn't a great football player was nothing more or less than a moron! Because, no matter how good a guy was, if he didn't follow the ball—

And, of course, there was Joe himself, who, while giving Luck its due, still dared to take a little credit for what had happened.

And then there was Rusty.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious printer's, punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

[The end of *Follow the Ball* by Ralph Henry Barbour]