

Standish Burt L.

Lefty Locke Pitcher- Manager



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CHAPTER I

AN UNEXPECTED OFFER

Lefty Locke gave the man a look of surprise. The soft, bright moonlight was shining full on Weegman's face, and he was chuckling. He was always chuckling or laughing outright, and Locke had grown tired of it. It was monotonous.

"What do you mean?" the pitcher asked. "Tinware for Kennedy! I don't believe I get you."

Weegman snapped his fingers; another little trick that was becoming monotonous and irritating. "That's poor slang perhaps," he admitted; "but you've been in the game long enough to understand it. Collier is going to tie the can to old Jack."

Lefty moved his chair round on the little vine-covered porch in order to face his visitor squarely. Frogs were chorusing in the distance, and the dynamo in the electric power house on the edge of the town kept up its constant nocturnal droning.

"I could scarcely believe you meant just that," said the star slabman of the Blue Stockings soberly. "Being Charles Collier's private secretary, and therefore to a large extent aware of his

plans, I presume you know what you're talking about."

"You can bet on it," laughed Weegman, leaning back and puffing at his cigar. "I'm the man Collier left to carry out his orders regarding the team. I have full instructions and authority."

"But I'm sure Kennedy has no inkling of this. I correspond with him regularly, and I know he expected a new contract to sign before Mr. Collier went abroad. He wrote me that the contract was to be mailed him from New York, but that he supposed Collier, being a sick man, forgot it at the last moment."

Weegman took the cigar from his mouth, and leaned forward on the arm of his chair. "A new manager of the right sort is hard to find," he stated confidentially, "and Collier wasn't ready to let go all holds until he had some one else in view at least."

Locke uttered a smothered exclamation of incredulity. "Do you mean to tell me that Charles Collier was handing old Jack Kennedy a deal as deceitfully crooked as that?" he cried. "I can't believe it. Kennedy has been a faithful and loyal manager. Three years ago, when Collier secured the controlling interest in the club, his bad judgment led him to drop Kennedy and fill his place with Al Carson. You know what happened. Carson made a mess of it, and old Jack was called back at the last moment to save the day. He did it and won the championship for the Blue Stockings by a single game. Since then—"

"Come now!" chuckled Weegman, snapping his fingers again. "You know you were the man who really won that championship by your air-tight pitching. Why do you want to give somebody

else the credit? Kennedy merely went in as a pinch hitter—”

“And pounded the only run of the game across the rubber. No matter how air-tight a pitcher’s work may be, to win games the team behind him has got to hit. Kennedy was there with the goods.”

“That’s ancient history now. What has he done since then? As a player, he’s a has-been. He’s lost his eyes so that he can’t even bat in the pinches now. His sun has set, and he may as well retire to his farm and settle down for old age.”

“He hasn’t lost his brains,” asserted Locke warmly. “Playing or pinch hitting is a small part of a manager’s business. Once since then he’s copped the bunting for us, and last year it was hard luck and injury to players that dropped us into third position.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Weegman good naturedly. “You ought to stand up for him. It shows the right spirit. He gave you your chance—practically plucked you from the brambles. But,” he supplemented disparagingly, “he was desperately hard up for twirlers that season. You were sort of a lucky guess on his part. Save for the fact that he’s never been able to win a world’s championship, old Jack’s been picking four-leaf clovers all his life. He’s too soft and easy-going for a manager; not enough drive to him.”

It was Lefty Locke’s turn to laugh, but his merriment held more than a touch of irony. “Jack Kennedy has won pennants or kept in the first division, at least, with teams that would have been fighting for the subcellar under any other manager.

When meddlers have not interfered he's always been able to get the last ounce of baseball out of every man under him. While he has handled it the club has always been a big paying proposition. What he has done has been nothing short of miraculous considering the niggardly policy forced upon him by those in power. It's the lowest-salaried team in the league. We have men getting twenty-five hundred or three thousand who should be drawing down twice as much, and would be with any other winning Big League club. Only a man with Kennedy's magnetism and tact could have kept them going at high pressure, could have kept them from being dissatisfied and lying down. What they've accomplished has been done for him, not for the owners. And now you tell me he's to be canned. There's gratitude!"

"My dear man," chirruped Weegman, "baseball is business, and gratitude never goes far in business. Granting what you say may have been true in the past, it's plain enough that the old man's beginning to lose his grip. He fell down last season, and now that the Feds are butting in and making trouble, he's showing himself even more incompetent. Talk about gratitude; it didn't hold Grist or Orth, and now it's reported that Dillon is negotiating with the outlaws. You know what that means; our pitching staff is all shot to pieces. If the players were so true to Kennedy, why didn't they wait for their contracts?"

"How could Jack send them contracts when he hasn't one himself? If he had the authority now, perhaps he could save

Dillon for us even yet. Billy Orth is hot-headed and impulsive, and he thought he wasn't given a square deal. As for Grist, old Pete's days are numbered, and he knows it. He was wise to the talk about asking waivers on him. It was a ten-to-one shot he'd have been sent to the minors this coming season. With the Federals offering him a three-year contract at nearly twice as much as he ever received, he'd have been a fool to turn it down. All the same, he had a talk with Kennedy before he signed. Jack couldn't guarantee him anything, so he jumped."

"That's it!" exclaimed Weegman triumphantly. "There's a sample of Kennedy's incompetence right there. He should have baited Grist along, and kept him away from the Feds until the season was well under way, when they would have had their teams made up, and probably wouldn't have wanted Pete. Then, if he didn't come up to form, he could be let out to the minors."

Lefty's face being in the shadow, the other man did not see the expression of contempt that passed over it. For a few minutes the southpaw was too indignant to reply. When he did, however, his voice was level and calm, though a trifle hard.

"So that would have been your way of doing it! Grist has had hard luck with all his investments; I understand he's saved very little. He's a poor man."

Weegman lolled back again, puffing at his cigar. "That's his lookout. Anyway, he's not much loss. But these confounded Feds aren't through; they're after Dirk Nelson, too. What d'ye know about that! Our best catcher! They seem to be trying to strip our

whole team.”

“Knowing something about the salaries our players get, probably they figure it should be easy stripping.”

Suddenly the visitor leaned forward again, and gazed hard at Locke. He was not laughing now. “Have they been after you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I thought likely. Made you a big offer?”

“Yes.”

“What have you done?”

“Nothing.”

“Good!” exclaimed Weegman. “It’s a good thing for you that you kept your head. They’re outside organized ball, and any man who jumps to them will be blacklisted. All this talk about the money they have behind them is pure bluff.”

“Think so?”

“I know it. They’re plunging like lunatics, and they’ll blow up before the season’s over. They haven’t got the coin.”

“Then how does it happen they are signing players for three years, and handing over certified checks in advance for the first year, besides guaranteeing salaries by bank deposits for the full tenure of contracts?”

“Oh, they’ve got some money, of course,” admitted Weegman lightly; “but, as I say, they’re spending it like drunken sailors. When the Feds explode, the fools who have jumped to them will find themselves barred from organized ball for all time; they’ll

be down and out. The outlaws may hurt us a little this year, but after that—nothing doing. Just the same, I own up we've got to put a check on 'em before they rip the Blue Stockings wide open. That's what brings me down here to Fernandon to see you."

"Really!" said Lefty interestedly. "You seem to be shouldering a lot of responsibility."

"I am," chuckled Charles Collier's private secretary. "It was all arranged with Mr. Collier before he sailed. He left me with proper authority. I am to sign up the manager for the team."

"Is that right?" exclaimed Locke, surprised. "Then, according to your own statement, if you want to save the Blue Stockings from being riddled, you'd better be about it."

"I am," said Weegman. "That's why I've come to you."

"For advice?"

"Oh, no!" He laughed heartily. "I don't need that. I know what I'm about. I've brought a contract. I want you to put your name to it. Your salary will be advanced fifteen hundred dollars."

"The Feds offered to double it. As a pitcher—"

"You're not getting this extra money on account of your pitching," interposed Weegman promptly. "I'm offering you the increase of salary to assume the additional duties of manager."

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING QUEER

The expression of amazement that leaped into the eyes of Lefty Locke was masked by a shadow. He stiffened, and sat bolt upright, speechless.

Bailey Weegman, having stated the business that had unexpectedly brought him down from the North to the Florida town where the great left-hander of the Blue Stockings was spending the winter with his wife, once more settled back, taking a long, satisfied pull at the stump of his fragrant Havana. He was chuckling beneath his breath. A gentle breeze crept into the leaves of the vine-covered porch and set them whispering like gossips. The dynamo droned drowsily in the distance.

Presently Lefty found his voice. "What's the joke?" he asked a trifle harshly.

"No joke," assured the jovial visitor. "I'm not given to joking. I'm a man of business."

"But it's preposterous! A pitcher for manager!"

"Clark Griffith isn't the only pitcher who has succeeded as a manager."

"Griffith's success came when he was on the decline as a pitcher."

"What's the use to argue, Locke? There's really no good

reason why a pitcher shouldn't manage a ball team. You've been doing it with the little amateur club you've been running down here in Fernandon this winter."

"Because necessity compelled. Nobody else would take hold of it. I organized the team for a special reason. It's made up mainly of visitors from the North. No salaries are paid. I had located here for the winter, and I wanted to keep in trim and work my arm into shape for the coming season. I couldn't find anybody else to organize the club and handle it, so I had to. I have only three other players who have been with me from the start. The rest of the nine has been composed of changing players who came and went, college men, or just plain amateurs who have taken to the sport. We have played such teams as could be induced to come here from Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and other places. Handling such a club has given me absolutely no reason to fancy myself qualified to manage one in the Big League."

"I've been keeping my eye on you," said Weegman patronizingly, "and I am satisfied that you can fill the position of playing manager for the Blue Stockings."

"You're satisfied—you! How about Charles Collier?"

"As you know, he's a sick man, a very sick man. Otherwise he'd never have dropped everything just at this time to go to Europe along with a physician and trained nurses. He has been too ill to attend properly to his regular business outside baseball, and therefore his business has suffered. He has had heavy financial reverses that have worried him. And now the

meddling of the Feds has hurt the value of the ball club. The stock wouldn't bring at a forced sale to-day half what it should be worth. Mr. Collier trusts me. He was anxious to get some of the load off his shoulders. He has left me to straighten out matters connected with the team."

"Where is Mr. Collier now?" asked Locke quietly.

"He was taking the baths at Eaux Chaudes when last heard from, but he has since left there. I can't say where he is at the present time."

"Then how may he be communicated with in case of emergency?"

Chuckling, Weegman lighted a fresh cigar, having tossed the remnant of the other away. The glow of the match fully betrayed an expression of self-satisfaction on his face.

"He can't be," he said. "It was his doctor's idea to get him away where he could not be troubled by business of any nature. He may be in Tunis or Naples for all I know."

"It's very remarkable," said Lefty slowly.

"Oh, I don't know," purred the other man, locking his fingers over his little round stomach which seemed so incongruous for a person who was otherwise not overfat. "Really, he was in a bad way. Worrying over business reverses was killing him. His only salvation was to get away from it all."

Locke sat in thought, watching the serene smoker through narrowed lids. There was something queer about the affair, something the southpaw did not understand. True, Collier had

seemed to be a nervous, high-strung man, but when Lefty had last seen him he had perceived no indications of such a sudden and complete breakdown. It had been Collier's policy to keep a close and constant watch upon his baseball property, but now, at a time when such surveillance was particularly needed because of the harassing activities of the Federals, having turned authority over to a subordinate, not only had he taken himself beyond the range of easy communication, but apparently he had cut himself off entirely from the sources of inside information concerning baseball affairs. Furthermore, it seemed to Locke that the man who claimed to have been left in full control of that branch of Collier's business was the last person who should have been chosen. What lay behind it all the pitcher was curious to divine.

Presently Weegman gave a castanet-like snap of his fingers. "By the way," he said sharply, "how about your arm?"

"My arm?" said Lefty. "You mean—"

"It's all right, isn't it? You know there was a rumor that you hurt it in the last game of the season. Some wise ginks even said you'd never pitch any more."

"I've been doing some pitching for my team here in Fernandon."

"Then, of course, the old wing's all right. You'll be in form again, the greatest left-hander in the business. How about it?"

"I've never been egotistical enough to put that estimate on myself."

"Well, that's what lots of the sharps call you. The arm's as

good as ever?”

“If you stop over to-morrow you’ll have a chance to judge for yourself. We’re scheduled to play a roving independent nine known as the Wind Jammers, and I hear they’re some team, of the kind. I shall pitch part of the game, anyhow.”

“You’ve been pitching right along?”

“A little in every game lately. I pitched four innings against the Jacksonville Reds and five against the Cuban Giants. We’ve lost only one game thus far, and that was our second one. The eccentric manager and owner of the Wind Jammers, who calls himself Cap’n Wiley, threatens to take a heavy fall out of us. He has a deaf-mute pitcher, Mysterious Jones, who, he claims, is as good as Walter Johnson.”

Weegman laughed derisively. “There’s no pitcher as good as Johnson anywhere, much less traveling around with a bunch of hippodromers and bushwhackers. But about your arm—is it all right?”

“I hope to win as many games with it this year as I did last.”

“Well, the team’s going to need pitchers. The loss of Orth is bound to be felt, and if Dillon jumps—Look here, Locke, we’ve got to get busy and dig up two or three twirlers, one of top-notch caliber.”

“We!”

“Yes, you and I. Of course we can’t expect to get a first-stringer out of the bushes; that happens only once in a dog’s age. But perhaps Kennedy has some good youngsters up his sleeve.

You should know about that. I'm wise that he has consulted you regularly. He's sought your advice, and listened to it; so, in a way, you've had considerable to do with the management of the team. You say you've corresponded with him right along. You ought to know all about his plans. That's one reason why I came to figure on you as the man to fill his place."

"I wondered," murmured Locke.

"That's one reason. For another thing, you've got modesty as well as sense. You don't think you know it all. You're not set in your ways, and probably you'd listen to advice and counsel. Old Jack is hard-headed and stiff; when he makes up his mind there's no turning him. He takes the bit in his teeth, and he wants full swing. He's always seemed to feel himself bigger than the owners. He's butted up against Mr. Collier several times, and Collier's always had to give in."

"As I understand it," said Lefty smoothly, "you think the manager should be a man with few fixed opinions and no set and rigid policy."

"In a way, that's something like it," admitted Weegman. "He mustn't go and do things wholly on his own initiative and without consulting anybody, especially those who have a right to say something about the running of the team. Mr. Collier has placed me in a position that makes it imperative that I should keep my fingers on the pulse of things. I couldn't conscientiously discharge my duty unless I did so. I know I could never get along with Kennedy. The manager must work with me; we'll work

together. Of course, in most respects he'll be permitted to do about as he pleases as long as he seems to be delivering the goods; but it must be understood that I have the right to veto, as well as the right to direct, policies and deals. With that understanding to start with, we'll get along swimmingly." He finished with a laugh.

Lefty rose to his feet. "You're not looking for a manager, Weegman," he said. "What you want is a putty man, a figurehead. Under any circumstances, you've come to the wrong market."

CHAPTER III

THE FEDERAL POLICY

Weegman was startled. “What–what’s that?” he spluttered, staring upward at the towering figure in white. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I’ve said,” replied the pitcher grimly. “Under no circumstances would I think of stepping into old Jack Kennedy’s shoes; but even if he were a perfect stranger to me you could not inveigle me into the management of the Blue Stockings on the conditions you have named. Management!” he scoffed. “Why, the man who falls for that will be a tame cat with clipped claws. It’s evident, Mr. Weegman, that you’ve made a long journey for nothing.”

For a moment the visitor was speechless. Lefty Locke’s modest, unassuming ways, coupled with undoubted ambition and a desire to get on, had led Charles Collier’s secretary to form a very erroneous estimate of him.

“But, man alive,” said Weegman, “do you realize what you’re doing? You’re turning down the chance of a lifetime. I have the contract right here in my pocket, with Collier’s name properly attached and witnessed. If you doubt my authority to put the deal through, I can show you my power of attorney from Mr. Collier. In case sentiment or gratitude is holding you back, let me tell you

that under no circumstances will Kennedy again be given control of the team. Now don't be a chump and—”

“If I were in your place,” interrupted Locke, “I wouldn't waste any more breath.”

Weegman snapped his fingers, and got up. “I won't! I didn't suppose you were quite such a boob.”

“But you did suppose I was boob enough to swallow your bait at a gulp. You thought me so conceited and greedy that I would jump at the chance to become a puppet, a manager in name only, without any real authority or control. It's plainly your purpose to be the real manager of the team, for what reason or design I admit I don't quite understand. Just how you hypnotized Charles Collier and led him to consent to such a scheme I can't say; but I do say that no successful ball team has ever been run in such a way. You're not fit to manage a ball club, and you wouldn't dare assume the title as well as the authority; probably you know Collier wouldn't stand for that. Yet you intend to force your dictation upon a pseudo-manager. Such meddling would mean muddling; it would knock the last ounce of starch out of the team. If the Blue Stockings didn't finish a bad tailender it would be a miracle.”

Bailey Weegman was furious all the way through, but still he laughed and snapped his fingers.

“You're a wise guy, aren't you?” he sneered. “I didn't dream you were so shrewd and discerning. Now let me tell you something, my knowing friend: I've tried to save your neck, and

you won't have it."

"My neck!" exclaimed the pitcher incredulously. "You've tried to save my neck?"

"Oh, I know your old soup bone's on the blink; you didn't put anything over me by dodging and trimming when I questioned you about your arm. You knocked it out last year, and you've been spending the winter down here trying to work it back into shape. You can pitch a little against weak bush teams, but you can't even go the whole distance against one of them. That being the case, what sort of a figure do you expect to cut back in the Big League? Up against the slugging Wolves or the hard-hitting Hornets, how long would you last? I've got your number, and you know it."

"If that's so, it seems still more remarkable that you should wish to hold me. Certainly I'd be a great addition to a pitching staff that's smashed already!"

"Did I say anything about your strengthening the pitching staff? I offered to engage you in another capacity. Think I didn't know why you declined to dicker with the Feds when they made you a big offer? You didn't dare, for you know you couldn't deliver the goods. Having that knowledge under my hat, I've been mighty generous with you." Weegman descended to the top step, chuckling.

"Good night," said Locke, longing to hasten the man's departure.

"Think it over," invited Charles Collier's representative. "Now

that I'm here, I'll stick around and watch you pitch against these bushwhacking Wind Jammers to-morrow. I imagine your efforts should be amusing. Perhaps you'll change your mind before I catch the train north at Yulee." His chuckling became open laughter.

Lefty turned and entered the cottage, while Weegman walked away in the moonlight, the smoke of his cigar drifting over his shoulder.

Certain circumstances had led Philip Hazelton to enter professional baseball under the pseudonym of "Tom Locke," to which, as he was a left-hander, his associates had added the nickname of "Lefty." These names had stuck when he abruptly moved upward into the Big League. His rise having been rocketlike, the pessimistic and the envious had never wholly ceased to look for the fall of a stick. Thus far, in spite of the fact that each year of his service with the Blue Stockings saw him shouldering more and more of the pitching load, until like Jack Coombs and Ed Walsh he had become known as "the Iron Man," they had looked in vain. And it came to pass that even the most prejudiced was forced to admit that it was Lefty who kept his team "up there" fighting for the bunting all the time.

Toward the close of the last season, however, with the jinx in close pursuit of the Blue Stockings, Locke had pushed himself beyond the limit. At one time the club had seemed to have the pennant cinched, but through the crippling of players it had begun to slip in the latter part of the season. In the desperate

struggle to hold on, going against Manager Kennedy's judgment and advice, Lefty did more pitching than any other two men on the staff, and with a little stronger team to support him his winning percentage would have been the highest of any pitcher in the league. It was not his fault that the Blue Stockings did not finish better than third.

In the cozy living room of the little furnished cottage Locke had leased for the brief winter months a remarkably pretty young woman sat reading by a shaded lamp. She looked up from the magazine and smiled at him as he came in. Then she saw the serious look upon his face, and the smile faded.

"What is it, Phil?" she asked, with a touch of anxiety. "Is anything wrong?"

He sat down, facing her, and told her all about his interview with Bailey Weegman. As she listened, her mobile face betrayed wonderment, annoyance, and alarm.

"It's a raw deal for Kennedy," he asserted in conclusion; "and I believe it's wholly of Weegman's devising. I'm sure, when the season ended, Collier had no idea of changing managers. There isn't a more resourceful, astute man in the business than old Jack."

"You're always thinking of others, Phil," she said. "How about yourself? What will happen to you if you don't come to Weegman's terms?"

"Hard to tell," he admitted frankly. "In fact, I've been wondering just where I'd get off. If my arm fails to come back—"

She uttered a little cry. "But you've been telling me--"

"That it was growing better, Janet, that's true. But still it's not what it should be, and I don't dare put much of a strain on it. I don't know that I'd last any time at all in real baseball. Weegman is wise, yet he offered me a contract to pitch and to manage the team. On paper it would seem that he had retained one star twirler for the staff, but if I failed to come back we wouldn't have a single first-string slabman. As a manager, I would be sewed up so that I couldn't do anything without his consent. There's a nigger in the woodpile, Janet."

She had put the magazine aside, and clasped her hands in her lap. He went on:

"It looks to me as if somebody is trying to punch holes in the team, though I don't get the reason for it. Following Jack Kennedy's advice, I've invested every dollar I could save in the stock of the club. As Weegman says, it's doubtful if the stock would bring fifty cents on the dollar at a forced sale to-day. Collier has met with heavy financial reverses in other lines. He's sick, and he's in Europe where no one can communicate with him. Is somebody trying to knock the bottom out of his baseball holdings in order to get control of the club? It looks that way from the offing."

"But you," said Janet, still thinking of her husband, "you're not tied up with Weegman, and the Federals have made you a splendid offer. You can accept that and land on your feet."

He smiled, shaking his head slowly. "There are several reasons

why I don't care to follow that course. The first, and strongest, is my loyalty to Jack Kennedy, the man who gave me a square deal. Then I don't care to bunko anybody, and unless my arm comes back I won't be worth the money the Feds have offered for my services. Lastly, I'm not sure the new league is going to be strong enough to win out against organized baseball."

"But you've said that they seem to have plenty of money behind them. You've said, too, that their plan of dealing directly with players, instead of buying and selling them like chattels or slaves, was the only system that gave the players a just and honest deal."

"That's right," affirmed Lefty. "Slavery in baseball is something more than a joke. The organization has been one of the biggest trusts in the country, and it has dealt in human beings. It has been so that when a man signed his first contract he signed away his right to say what he would do as long as he remained in the game. After that he could be bought, sold, or traded without receiving a dollar of the purchasing or trading price. He had to go where he was sent, regardless of his personal likes, wishes, or convenience. He had to accept whatever salary a manager chose to give him, or get out. Even if his contract had expired with one manager, he couldn't go to another and make a bargain, no matter how much the other manager was willing to give him; the reserve clause held him chained hand and foot. To-day, if the powers chose, I could be sent down to the minors at any old salary the minors chose to pay. I could be sold, like a horse or a dog, and

if I didn't like it I could quit the game. That would be my only recourse."

"It's terribly unfair," said Janet.

"Unfair? That's a tame word! On the other hand, the Federals are dealing directly with the players. If they think he's worth it, they give a man a good salary and a bonus besides. The bonus goes to the player, not to the club owner. Added to that, the Federal contracts provide that a club must increase a player's salary at least five per cent. each year, or give him his unconditional release, thus making it possible for him to deal with any other club that may want him."

"It's plain your sympathy is with the Federals."

"If they're not trying to jack up organized baseball and sell out," said Lefty, "I hope they come through."

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGNETIZED BALL

“What are your plans?” asked Janet, after they had discussed the situation in all its phases. “Have you decided on anything?”

The southpaw answered: “I’m going to put Jack Kennedy wise. I’m going to write him a letter to-night, and I shall send him a telegram as soon as the office opens in the morning. It’s up to him to get in communication with Collier if there’s any way of doing it. You have not received a letter from Virginia lately?”

Virginia Collier, the charming daughter of the owner of the Blue Stockings, was Janet’s closest friend.

“No, I have not heard from her in over three weeks, and I don’t understand it,” returned his wife.

“She seems to have stepped off the map, along with her father. The whole business is mysterious. Why don’t you write her at once, explaining what is going on, and send the letter to her last address?”

“I will.”

“It may not reach her, but there’s no harm in trying. Meanwhile, I’ll get busy on mine to Kennedy. There doesn’t seem to be much chance to spike Weegman’s guns, but it’s worth trying.”

Locke had the knack of writing a succinct letter; the one he

wrote old Jack was concise, yet it was clear and complete. Within two minutes after opening it, doubtless Kennedy would know as much about the situation as did Lefty himself. Yet it was probable that, like the pitcher, the manager would be mystified by the surprising and seemingly sinister maneuvers of Bailey Weegman.

Following Lefty's advice, Janet wrote to Virginia Collier.

Locke rose early the following morning and posted the letters for the first outward mail. He sent a telegram also. Returning past the Magnolia Hotel, to his surprise he perceived Collier's private secretary sitting on the veranda, smoking. Weegman beamed and chuckled.

"Morning," he cried, waving his cigar between two fingers. "The early bird, eh? Been firing off a little correspondence, I presume. Our communications will reach Kennedy in the same mail; and I wired him, too. Quite a little jolt for the old man, but it can't be helped. Of course, he'll have the sense to bow gracefully to the inevitable, and that will clear the air. Afterward, perhaps, you may change your mind regarding my offer."

"Perhaps so," returned Lefty pleasantly. "But if I do, I shall be a fit subject for a padded cell." The agreeable look was wiped from Weegman's face as Locke passed on.

Some time after breakfast Lefty returned to the Magnolia to learn if Cap'n Wiley and his ball players had arrived. Approaching, he perceived a queer assortment of strangers lounging on the veranda, and from their appearance he judged that they were members of the team. Many of them looked

like old stagers, veterans who had seen better days; some were youthful and raw and inclined to be cock-a-hoop. There was a German, an Italian, an Irishman, and a Swede. One was lanky as a starved greyhound, and apparently somewhere near six feet and six inches tall from his heels to his hair roots. Another was short and fat, and looked as if he had been driven together by some one who had hit him over the head with a board.

In a way, these strangers in Fernandon were most remarkable for their attire. With scarcely an exception, the clothes they wore were weird and fantastic samples of sartorial art; various, and nearly all, prevailing freaks of fashion were displayed. With colored shirts, flaring socks, and giddy neckties, they caused all beholders to gasp. They were most amazingly bejeweled and adorned. With difficulty Locke suppressed a smile as his quick eyes surveyed them.

Near the head of the broad steps leading up to the veranda sat a somewhat stocky but exceptionally well-built man of uncertain age. He was almost as swarthy as an Indian, and his dark eyes were swift and keen and shrewd. His black hair was graying on the temples. His coat and trousers, of extravagant cut, were made from pronounced black-and-white-striped material. His fancy waistcoat, buttoned with a single button at the bottom, was adorned with large orange-colored figures. His silk socks were red, his four-in-hand necktie was purple, and the band that encircled the straw hat cocked rakishly upon his head was green. He was smoking a cigar and pouring a steady flow of words into

the ear of Bailey Weegman, who made a pretense of not noticing Locke.

“Yes, mate,” he was saying, “old man Breckenridge was the most painfully inconsiderate batter I ever had the misfortune to pitch against. Smoke, curves, twisters, slow balls, low balls, and high balls—they all looked alike to him. Now I have a preference; I prefer a high ball, Scotch and carbonic. But it made no difference to Breck; when he put his fifty-five-ounce ash wand against the pill, said pill made a pilgrimage—it journeyed right away to some land distant and remote and unknown, and it did not stay upon the order of its going. When it came right down to slugging, compared with old Breck your Home-run Bakers and Honus Wagners and Napoleon Lajoies are puny and faded shines. And he always seemed able to make connections when he desired; if he rambled forth to the dish yearning for a hit, there was no known method by which the most astute and talented pitcher could prevent him from hitting.”

“Quite a wonder, I must admit!” laughed Weegman, in high amusement. “Rather strange the Big Leagues didn’t get hold of such a marvelous batsman, isn’t it?”

“Oh, he was on the roster of some Class A team at various times, but he had one drawback that finally sent him away to the remote and uncharted bushes: ‘Charley horse’ had him in its invidious grip. A spavined snail could beat Breck making the circuit of the sacks, and cross the pan pulled up. Yet, with this handicap, the noble old slugger held the record for home runs in

the Tall Grass League. Naturally I had heart failure and Angie Pectoris every time I was compelled to face him on the slab. Likewise, naturally I began meditating with great vigor upon a scheme to circumvent the old terror, and at last my colossal brain concocted a plan that led me to chortle with joy.”

“I am deeply interested and curious,” declared Weegman, as the narrator paused, puffing complacently at his weed. “Go on.”

Locke had stopped near at hand, and was listening. Others were hovering about, their ears open, their faces wreathed in smiles.

“It was a simple matter of scientific knowledge and a little skulduggery,” pursued the story-teller obligingly. “I possessed the knowledge, and I bribed the bat boy of old Breck’s team to perform the skulduggery. I sent to the factory and had some special baseballs manufactured for me, and in the heart of each ball was hidden a tiny but powerful magnet. Then I secretly furnished the rascally bat boy with a specially prepared steel rod that would violently repel any magnet that chanced to wander around into the immediate vicinity of the rod. I instructed the boy to bore Breck’s pet bat surreptitiously when the shades of night had fallen, insert the steel rod, and then craftily plug the hole. And may I never sail the briny deep again if that little scoundrel didn’t carry out my instructions with the skill of a cutthroat, or a diplomat, even! Nature intended him for higher things. If he isn’t hanged some day it won’t be his fault.

“Well, the next time old Breck brought his team to play against

us upon our field, I used the magnetized baseballs. I was doing the hurling and in the very first inning the old swatter came up with the sacks charged and two out. He smiled a smile of pity as he bent his baleful glance upon me. 'You'd better walk me, Walter,' says he, 'and force a run; for if you put the spheroid over I'm going to give it a long ride.' I returned his smile with one of the most magnanimous contempt. 'Don't blow up, old boy,' says I. 'With the exception of your batting, you're all in; and I've a notion that your batting eye is becoming dim and hazy. Let's see you hit this.' Then I passed him a slow, straight one right over the middle of the rubber. He took a mighty swing at it, meaning to slam it over into the next county. Well, mate, may I be keelhauled if that ball didn't dodge the bat like a scared rabbit! Mind you, I hadn't put a thing on it, but the repulsion of that deneutronized steel rod hidden in the bat forced the ball to take the handsomest drop you ever beheld, and the violence with which old Breck smote the vacant ozone caused him to spin round and concuss upon the ground when he sat down. It was a tremendous shock to his nervous system, and it filled me with unbounded jubulance; for I knew I had him at my mercy, literally in the hollow of my hand.

"He rose painfully, chagrined and annoyed, but still confident. 'Give me another like that, you little wart!' he ordered savagely, 'and I'll knock the peeling off it.' Beaming, I retorted: 'You couldn't knock the peeling off a prune. Here's what you called for.' And I threw him another slow, straight one.

“Excuse these few tears; the memory of that hallowed occasion makes me cry for joy. He did it again, concussing still more shockingly when he sat down. It was simply an utter impossibility for him to hit that magnetized ball with his doctored bat. But, of course, he didn’t know what the matter was; he thought I was fooling him with some sort of a new drop I had discovered. The fact that I was passing him the merry cachinnation peeved him vastly. When he got upon his pins and squared away for the third attempt, his face was the most fearsome I ever have gazed upon. He shook his big bat at me. ‘One more,’ he raged; ‘give me one more, and drop flat on your face the moment you pitch the ball, or I’ll drive it straight through the meridian of your anatomy!’

“Let me tell you now, mate, that Breck was a gentleman, and that was the first and only time I ever knew him to lose his temper. Under the circumstances, he was excusable. I put all my nerve-shattering steam into the next pitch, and, instead of dropping, the ball hopped over his bat when he smote at it. I had fanned the mighty Breckenridge, and the wondering crowd lifted their voices in hosannas. Yet I know they regarded it in the nature of an accident, and not until I had whiffed him three times more in the same game did either Breck or the spectators arrive at the conviction that I had something on him.

“After that,” said the narrator, as if in conclusion, “I had him eating out of my hand right up to the final and decisive game of the season.”

Weegman begged the fanciful romancer to tell what happened in the last game.

“Oh, we won,” was the assurance; “but we never would have if Breck had been wise the last time he came to bat. It was in the ninth inning, with the score three to two in our favor, two down, and runners on second and third. Knowing it was Breck’s turn to hit, I was confident we had the game sewed up. But the confidence oozed out of me all of a sudden when I saw the big fellow paw the clubs over to select a bat other than his own. Clammy perspiration started forth from every pore of my body. With any other swat stick beside his own, I knew he was practically sure to drive any ball I could pitch him over the fence. The agony of apprehension which I endured at that moment gave me my first gray hairs.

“Although I did not know it at the time, it chanced that Breck had selected the bat of another player who had had it bored and loaded with an ordinary steel rod. This, you can clearly understand, made it more than doubly certain that he would hit the magnetized ball, which would be attracted instead of repelled. Had I known this, I shouldn’t have had the heart to pitch at all.

“As the noble warrior stood up to the pan, I considered what I could pitch him. Curves could not fool him, and he literally ate speed. Therefore, without hope, I tossed him up a slow one. Now it chanced that the old boy had decided to try a surprise, having become disheartened by his efforts to slug; he had resolved to

attempt to bunt, knowing such a move would be unexpected. So he merely stuck out his bat as the sphere came sailing over. The magnet was attracted by the steel rod, and the ball just jumped at the bat, against which it struck—and stuck! I hope never to tell the truth again, mate, if I'm not stating a simple, unadulterated, unvarnished fact. The moment the ball touched the bat it stuck fast to it as if nailed there. Breck was so astonished that he stood in his tracks staring at the ball like a man turned to stone. I was likewise paralyzed for an extemporaneous fraction of time, but my ready wit quickly availed me. Bounding forward, I wrenched the ball from the bat and tagged old Breck with it, appealing to the umpire for judgment. There was only one thing his umps could do. He had seen the batter attempt to bunt, had seen bat and ball meet, and had seen me secure the ball on fair ground and put it on to the hitter. He declared Breckenridge out, and that gave us the game and the championship.”

Bailey Weegman lay back and roared. In doing so, he seemed to perceive Lefty for the first time. As soon as he could get his breath, he said:

“Oh, I say, Locke, let me introduce you. This is Cap'n Wiley, owner and manager of the Wind Jammers.”

CHAPTER V

A MAN OF MYSTERY

The swarthy little fabulist rose hastily to his feet, making a quick survey of the southpaw. "Am I indeed and at last in the presence of the great Lefty Locke?" he cried, his face beaming like the morning sun in a cloudless sky. "Is it possible that after many weary moons I have dropped anchor in the same harbor with the most salubriously efficacious port-side flinger of modern times? Pardon my deep emotion! Slip me your mudhook, Lefty; let me give you the fraternal grip."

He grabbed Locke's hand and wrung it vigorously, while the other members of the Wind Jammers pressed nearer, looking the Big League pitcher over with interest.

"In many a frozen igloo," declared Wiley, "I have dreamed of this day when I should press your lily-white fingers. Oft and anon during my weary sojourn in that far land of snow and ice have I pictured to myself the hour when we should stand face to face and exchange genuflections and greetings. And whenever a smooched and tattered months-old newspaper would drift in from civilization, with what eager and expectant thrills did I tremulously turn to the baseball page that I might perchance read thereon how you had stung the Hornets, bitten the Wolves, clipped the claws of the Panthers, or plucked the feathers from

the White Wings!”

“And I have been wondering,” confessed Lefty, “if you could be the original Cap’n Wiley of whom I heard so many strange tales in my boyhood. It was reported that you were dead.”

“Many a time and oft hath that canard been circulated. According to rumor, I have demised a dozen times or more by land and sea; but each time, like the fabled Phoenix, I have risen from my ashes. During the last few fleeting years I have been in pursuit of fickle fortune in far-off Alaska, where it was sometimes so extremely cold that fire froze and we cracked up the congealed flames into little chunks which we sold to the Chilkoots and Siwashes as precious bright red stones. Strange to say, whenever I have related this little nanny goat it has been received with skepticism and incredulity. The world is congested with doubters.”

“When you wrote me,” admitted Locke, “proposing to bring your Wind Jammers here to play the Fernandon Grays, I thought the letter was a hoax. At first I was tempted not to answer it, and when I did reply it was out of curiosity more than anything else; I wanted to see what the next twist of the joke would be.”

“Let me assure you that you will find playing against the Wind Jammers no joke. I have conglomerated together the fastest segregation of baseball stars ever seen outside a major league circuit, and I say it with becoming and blushing modesty. Look them over,” he invited, with a proud wave of his hand toward the remarkable group of listeners. “It has always been my contention

that there are just as good players to be found outside the Big League as ever wore the uniform of a major. I have held that hard luck, frowning fate, or contumelious circumstances have conspired to hold these natural-born stars down and prevent their names from being chiseled on the tablet of fame. Having gathered unto myself a few slippery shekels from my mining ventures in the land where baseball games begin at the hour of midnight, I have now set out to prove my theory, and before I am through I expect to have all balldom sitting up agog and gasping with wonderment.”

“I wish you luck,” replied Lefty. “If you don’t do anything else, you ought to get some sport out of it. I presume you still ascend the mound as a pitcher?”

“Oh,” was the airy answer, “on rare occasions I give the gaping populace a treat by propelling the sphere through the atmosphere. When my projector is working up to its old-time form, I find little difficulty in leading the most formidable batters to vainly slash the vacant ether. The weather seeming propitious, I may burn a few over this p.m. I trust you will pitch also.”

“I think I shall start the game, at least.”

Bailey Weegman butted in. “But he won’t finish it, Wiley. Like yourself, he’s not doing as much pitching as he did once.” His laugh was significant.

The owner of the Wind Jammers looked startled. “Tell me not in mournful numbers that your star is already on the decline!” he exclaimed, looking at Locke with regret. “That’s what the Big

Leagues do to a good man; they burn him out like a pitch-pine knot. I've felt all along that the Blue Stockings were working you too much, Lefty. Without you on their roster ready to work three or four times a week in the pinches, they never could have kept in the running."

"You're more than complimentary," said Locke, after giving Weegman a look. "But I think I'll be able to shake something out of my sleeve this season, the same as ever."

"Then don't let them finish you, don't let them grind you to a frazzle," advised Wiley. "For the first time in recent history you have a chance for your white alley; the Federals are giving you that. If you're not already enmeshed in the folds of a contract, the Feds will grab you and hand you a square deal."

Weegman rose, chuckling and snapping his fingers. "All this talk about what the Feds can do is gas!" he declared. "They're getting nothing but the soreheads and deadwood of organized baseball, which will be vastly better off without the deserters. Cripples and has-beens may make a good thing out of the Feds for a short time. Perhaps Locke would find it profitable to jump." His meaning was all too plain.

Lefty felt like taking the insinuating fellow by the neck and shaking him until his teeth rattled, but outwardly he was not at all ruffled or disturbed. "Mr. Weegman," he said, "is showing pique because I have not seen fit to sign up as manager of the Blue Stockings. He professes to have authority from Charles Collier to sign the manager, Collier having gone abroad for his health."

"If anybody doubts my authority," shouted Weegman, plunging his hand into an inner pocket of his coat, "I can show the documents that will—"

The southpaw had turned his back on him. "I understand you have a clever pitcher in the man known as Mysterious Jones, Wiley," he said.

"A pippin!" was the enthusiastic answer. "I'll give you a chance to see him sagaciate to-day."

"He is a deaf-mute?"

"He couldn't hear a cannon if you fired it right under the lobe of his ear, and he does his talking with his prehensile digits. Leon Ames in his best days never had anything on Jones."

"Strange I never even heard of him. Our scouts have scoured the bushes from one end of the country to the other."

"I never collided with any baseball scouts in Alaska," said Wiley.

"Oh! You found Jones in Alaska?"

"Pitching for a team in Nome."

"But baseball up there! I didn't know—"

"Oh, no; nobody ever thinks of baseball up there, but in the all too short summer season there's something doing in that line. Why, even modern dances have begun to run wild in Alaska, so you see they're right up to the present jiffy."

"Where did this Jones originally hail from?"

"Ask me! I don't know. Nobody I ever met knew anything about him, and what he knows about himself he won't tell. He's

mysterious, you understand; but his beautiful work on the slab has caused my classic countenance to break into ripples and undulations and convolutions of mirth.”

“Where is he? I’d like to give him the once over.”

“I think he’s out somewhere prowling around the town and sizing up the citizens. That’s one of his little vagaries; he has a combustable curiosity about strangers. Every place we go he wanders around for hours lamping the denizens of the burg. Outside baseball, strange people seem to interest him more than anything in the world; but once he has taken a good square look at a person, henceforth and for aye that individual ceases to attract him; if he ever gives anybody a second look, it is one of absolute indifference. Oh, I assure you with the utmost voracity that Jones is an odd one.”

“He must be,” agreed Lefty.

“Ay tank, cap’n,” said Oleson, the Swede outfielder, “that Yones now bane comin’ up the street.”

Wiley turned and gazed at an approaching figure. “Yes,” he said, “that’s him. Turn your binnacle lights on him, Lefty; behold the greatest pitcher adrift in the uncharted regions of baseball.”

CHAPTER VI

PECULIAR BEHAVIOR

Jones was rather tall and almost slender, although he had a fine pair of shoulders. His arm was as long as Walter Johnson's. His face was as grave as that of the Sphinx, and held more than a touch of the same somber sadness. His eyes were dark and keen and penetrating; with a single glance they seemed to pierce one through and through. And they were ever on the move, like little ferrets, searching, searching, searching. As he approached the hotel, he met a man going in the opposite direction, and he half paused to give the man a sharp, lance-like stare. Involuntarily the man drew aside a trifle and, walking on, turning to look back with an expression of mingled questioning and resentment. But Jones had resumed his habitual pace, his appearance that of a person who, already overburdened, had received one more disappointment.

Barney O'Reilley, the shortstop, laughed. "Sure," said he, "it's a bit of a jump old Jonesy hands any one he looks at fair and hard."

Lefty Locke felt a throb of deep interest and curiosity. There was something about the deaf-mute pitcher of the Wind Jammers that aroused and fascinated him instantly. His first thought was that the man might be mentally unbalanced to a

slight degree; but, though he knew not why, something caused him to reject this conviction almost before it was formed. Apparently Jones was well named “Mysterious.”

“There’s the bird, Lefty,” said Cap’n Wiley proudly. “There’s the boy who’d make ’em sit up and take notice if ever he got a show in the Big League. Yours truly, the Marine Marvel, knew what he was doing when he plucked that plum in the far-away land of lingering snows.”

A queer sound behind him, like a hissing, shuddering gasp, caused Locke to look around quickly. The sound had come from Weegman, who, face blanched, mouth agape, eyes panic-stricken, was staring at the approaching pitcher. Amazement, doubt, disbelief, fear—he betrayed all these emotions. Even while he leaned forward to get a better view over the shoulder of a man before him, he shrank back, crouching like one ready to take to his heels.

Like a person pleased by the sound of his own voice, Cap’n Wiley rattled on in laudation of his mute pitcher. No one save Locke seemed to notice Weegman; and so wholly fascinated by the sight of Jones was the latter that he was quite oblivious to the fact that he had attracted any attention.

“Smoke!” Wiley was saying. “Why, mate, when he uses all his speed, a ball doesn’t last a minute; the calorie friction it creates passing through the air burns the cover off.”

“Ya,” supplemented Shaeffer, the catcher, “und sometimes it sets my mitt afire.”

“Some speed!” agreed Lefty, as Jones, his head bent, reached the foot of the steps. “He looks tired.”

“He’s always that way after he tramps around a strange town,” said the owner of the Wind Jammers. “Afterward he usually goes to bed and rests, and he comes out to the games as full of fire and kinks as a boy who has stuffed himself with green apples. I’ll introduce you, Locke.”

The southpaw looked round again. Weegman was gone; probably he had vanished into the convenient door of the hotel. Cap’n Wiley drew Lefty forward to meet the voiceless pitcher, and, perceiving a stranger, Mysterious Jones halted at the top of the steps and stabbed him with a stare full in the face. Lefty had never looked into such searching, penetrating eyes.

Wiley made some deft and rapid movements with his hands and fingers, using the deaf-and-dumb language to make Jones aware of the identity of the famous Big League pitcher. Already the mute had lapsed into disappointed indifference, but he accepted Locke’s offered hand and smiled in a faint, melancholy way.

“He’s feeling especially downcast to-day,” explained Wiley, “and so he’ll pitch like a fiend this afternoon. He always twirls his best when he’s gloomiest; appears to entertain the delusion that he’s taking acrimonious revenge on the world for handing him some sort of a raw deal. It would be a shame to use him against you the whole game, Lefty; he’d make your Grays look like a lot of infirm prunes.”

“Spare us,” pleaded Locke, in mock apprehension.

Jones did not linger long with his teammates on the veranda. With a solemn but friendly bow to Lefty, he passed on into the hotel, Wiley explaining that he was on his way to take his regular daily period of rest. Through the open door the southpaw watched the strange pitcher walk through the office and mount a flight of stairs. And from the little writing room Locke saw Bailey Weegman peer forth, his eyes following the mysterious one until the latter disappeared. Then Weegman hurried to the desk and interviewed the clerk, after which he made an inspection of the names freshly written upon the hotel register.

The man’s behavior was singular, and Lefty decided that, for some reason, Weegman did not care to encounter Jones. This suspicion was strengthened when, scarcely more than an hour later, Charles Collier’s private secretary appeared at the little cottage occupied by Locke and his wife, and stated that he had made a change from the Magnolia Hotel to the Florida House, a second-rate and rather obscure place on the edge of the colored quarter.

“Couldn’t stand for Wiley and his gang of bushwhackers,” Weegman explained. “They made me sick, and I had to get out, even though I’m going to leave town at five-thirty this afternoon. That’s the first through train north that I can catch. Thought I’d let you know so you could find me in case you changed your mind about that offer.”

“You might have spared yourself the trouble,” said Locke

coldly.

Weegman made a pretense of laughing. “No telling about that. Mules are obstinate, but even they can be made to change their minds if you build a hot enough fire under them. Don’t forget where you can find me.”

Lefty watched him walking away, and noted that his manner was somewhat nervous and unnatural. “I wonder,” murmured the pitcher, “why you put yourself to so much discomfort to avoid Mysterious Jones.”

Directed by Locke, the Grays put in an hour of sharp practice that forenoon. As Lefty had stated, the team was practically comprised of winter visitors from the North. Some of them had come South for their health, too. Three were well along in the thirties, and one had passed forty. Yet, for all such handicaps, they were an enthusiastic, energetic team, and they could play the game. At least five of them had once been stars on college nines. Having never lost their love for the game, they had rounded into form wonderfully under the coaching of the Big League pitcher. Also, in nearly every game they pulled off more or less of the stuff known as “inside baseball.”

They had been remarkably successful in defeating the teams they had faced, but Locke felt sure that, in spite of the conglomerate and freakish appearance of the Wind Jammers, it was not going to be an easy thing to take a fall out of Cap’n Wiley’s aggregation of talent. The self-styled “Marine Marvel” had a record; with players culled from the brambles as

he knocked about the country, he had, in former days, put to shame many a strong minor league outfit that had patronizingly and somewhat disdainfully consented to give him an engagement on an off date. Unless the eccentric and humorously boastful manager of the Wind Jammers had lost much of his judgment and cunning during the recent years that he had been out of the public eye, the fastest independent team would have to keep awake and get a fair share of the breaks in order to trounce him.

Locke warmed up his arm a little, but, even though he felt scarcely a twinge of the lameness and stiffness that had given him so much apprehension, he was cautious. At one time, when the trouble was the worst, he had not been able to lift his left hand to his mouth. A massage expert in Fernandon had done much for him, and he hoped that he had done not a little for himself by perfecting a new style of delivery that did not put so much strain upon his shoulder. Still, until he should be forced to the test, he could never feel quite sure that he would be the same puzzle to the finest batsmen that he had once been. And it must be confessed that he had looked forward with some dread to the day when that test should come.

Suddenly he resolved that, in a way, he would meet the test at once. Doubtless the Wind Jammers were batters of no mean caliber, for Wiley had always got together a bunch of sluggers.

"I'll do it," he decided; "I'll go the limit. If I can't do that now, after the rest I've had and the doctoring my arm has received, there's not one chance in a thousand that I'll ever be able to pitch

in fast company again.”

CHAPTER VII

THE TEST

Nearly all Fernandon turned out to the game. Many residents of the town, as well as a large number of the visitors from the North, came in carriages and automobiles. The covered reserved seats were filled, and, shielding themselves from the sun with umbrellas, an eager crowd packed the bleachers. On the sandy grass ground back of third base a swarm of chattering, grinning colored people sat and sprawled. Holding themselves proudly aloof from the negroes, a group of lanky, sallow "poor whites," few of whom could read or write, were displaying their ignorance by their remarks about the game and the players. The mayor of the town had consented to act as umpire. At four o'clock he called "play."

"Now we're off!" sang Cap'n Wiley, waltzing gayly forth to the coaching position near third. "Here's where we hoist anchor and get away with a fair wind."

Nuccio, the olive-skinned Italian third baseman, selected his bat and trotted to the pan, grinning at Locke.

"Oh, you Lefty!" said he. "We gotta your number."

"Put your marlinespike against the pill and crack the coating on it," urged Wiley.

George Sommers, catcher for the Grays, adjusted his mask,

crouched, signaled. Locke whipped one over the inside corner, and Nuccio fouled.

“Nicked it!” cried the Marine Marvel. “Now bust it on the figurehead and make for the first mooring. Show our highly steamed friend Lefty that he’s got to pitch to-day if he don’t want the wind taken out of his sails.”

The southpaw tried to lead Nuccio into reaching, but the batter caught himself in his swing. “Put a ball over, Left,” he pleaded. “Don’t give a me the walk.”

The pitcher smiled and handed up a hopper. The batter fouled again, lifting the ball on to the top of the covered seats.

“I don’t think you need worry about walking,” said Sommers, returning after having made a vain start in pursuit of the sphere. “You’re in a hole already.”

Nuccio smiled. “Wait,” he advised. “I spoil the gooda ones.”

Another ball followed, then Lefty warped one across the corner. Nuccio drove it into right for a pretty single, bringing shouts of approval from the bench of the Wind Jammers. Wiley addressed Locke.

“Really,” he said, “I fear me much that you undervalue the batting capacity of my players. One and all, individually and collectively, they are there with the healthy bingle. Please, I beg of you, don’t let them pound you off the slab in the first inning, for that would puncture a hard-earned reputation and bring tears of regret to my tender eyes. For fear that you may be careless or disdainful, I warn you that this next man can’t touch anything

down around his knees; his arms being attached to his shoulders at such a dim and distant altitude, he finds it difficult to reach down so far, even with the longest bat.”

Luther Bemis, the player referred to, was the marvelously tall and lanky center fielder of the Wind Jammers. He had a queer halting walk, like a person on stilts, and his appearance was so ludicrous that the spectators tittered and laughed outright. Their amusement did not disturb him, for he grinned cheerfully as he squared away, waving his long bat.

“Don’t you pay no ’tention to the cap ’n, Lefty,” he drawled, in a nasal voice. “I can hit um acrost the knees jest as well as anywhere else. He’s tryin’ to fool ye.”

“Let’s see about that,” said Locke, putting one over low and close on the inside.

Bemis smashed out a hot grounder and went galloping to first with tremendous, ground-covering strides. For all of his awkward walk and the fact that he ran like a frightened giraffe, it would have required an excellent sprinter to beat him from the plate to the initial sack.

Norris, the shortstop, got his hand on the ball and stopped it, but it twisted out of his fingers. It was an error on a hard chance, for by the time he secured the sphere there was no prospect of getting either runner.

“Now that’s what I call misfortune when regarded from one angle, and mighty lucky if viewed from another,” said Wiley. “Beamy carries a rabbit’s foot; that’s why he’s second on our

batting disorder. He does things like that when they're least expected the most."

Schaeffer was coaching at first. "Is it Lefty Locke against us pitching?" he cried. "And such an easiness! Took a lead, frybody, and move along when the Irisher hits."

"I hate to do ut," protested Barney O'Reilley, shaking his red head as he walked into position. "It's a pain it gives me, Lefty, but I have to earn me salary. No bad feelings, ould man. You understand."

"Just one moment," called Wiley, holding up his hand. "Sympathy impels me. I have a tender heart. Lefty, I feel that I must warn you again. This descendant of the Irish nobility can hit anything that sails over the platter. If it were not a distressing fact that Schepps, who follows, is even a more royal batter, I would advise you to walk O'Reilley. As it is, I am in despair."

The crowd was not pleased. It began to beg Locke to fan O'Reilley, and when the Irishman missed the first shoot the pleadings increased.

"Barney is sympathetic also," cried Cap'n Wiley; "but he'd better not let his sympathy carry him amain, whatever that is. I shall fine him if he doesn't hit the ball."

Locke had begun to let himself out in earnest, for the situation was threatening. It would not be wise needlessly to permit the Wind Jammers to get the jump. They were a confident, aggressive team, and would fight to the last gasp to hold an advantage. The southpaw realized that it would be necessary

to do some really high-grade twirling to prevent them from grabbing that advantage in short order.

Tug Schepps, a tough-looking, hard-faced person, was swinging two bats and chewing tobacco as he waited to take his turn. He was a product of the sand lots.

“Land on it, Barney, old top!” urged Tug. “Swat it on der trade-mark an’ clean der sacks. Dis Lefty boy don’t seem such a much.”

Locke shot over a high one.

“Going up!” whooped O’Reilley, ignoring it.

“Get ’em down below the crow’s nest,” entreated Wiley. “You’re not pitching to Bemis now.”

The southpaw quickly tried a drop across the batter’s shoulders, and, not expecting that the ball had so much on it, Barney let it pass. He made a mild kick when the mayor-umpire called a strike. “It’s astigmatism ye have, Mr. Mayor,” he said politely.

The next one was too close, but O’Reilley fell back and hooked it past third base. Even though the left fielder had been playing in, Nuccio might possibly have scored had he not stumbled as he rounded the corner. Wiley started to grab the fallen runner, but remembered the new rule just in time, and desisted.

“Put about!” he shouted. “Head back to the last port!”

The Italian scrambled back to the sack, spluttering. He reached it ahead of the throw from the fielder. Cap’n Wiley pretended to shed tears.

“Is it possible,” he muttered, shaking his head, “that this is the great Lefty Locke? If so, it must be true that his star is on the decline. Alas and alack, life is filled with such bitter disappointments.”

Whether the regret of Wiley was real or pretended, it was shared by a large part of the spectators, who were friendly to the local team; for Locke had become very well liked in Fernandon, both by the citizens of the place and the Northern visitors.

It must not be imagined that, with the corners crowded and no one down, Locke was fully at his ease. He had decided to make this game the test of his ability to “come back,” and already it looked as if the first inning would give him his answer. If he could not successfully hold in check this heterogeneous collection of bush talent, it was easy to understand what would happen to him the next time he essayed to twirl for the Blue Stockings. A sickening sense of foreboding crept over him, but his lips wore a smile, and he showed no sign of being perturbed.

Schepps was at the plate, having discarded one of the bats he had been swinging. He grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Always t’ought I could bump a real league pitcher,” he said. “Put one acrost, pal, an’ I’ll tear der cover off.”

Locke hesitated. He had been using the new delivery he had acquired to spare his shoulder. In previous games it had proved effective enough to enable him to continue four or five innings, but now—

Suddenly he whipped the ball to third, sending Nuccio diving

headlong back to the sack. The crafty little Italian had been creeping off, ready to make a flying dash for the plate. He was safe by a hair.

“Not on your movie film!” cried Cap’n Wiley. “It can’t be done!”

Lefty did not hear him. He was gazing past the Marine Marvel at the face of a man who, taking care to keep himself unobtrusively in the background, was peering at him over the shoulders of a little group of spectators—a grinning, mocking derisive face.

It was Weegman. And Weegman knew!

CHAPTER VIII

AT NECESSITY'S DEMAND

Even after the ball was thrown back from third, and Lefty had turned away, that grinning, mocking face continued to leer at him. Wherever he looked it hovered before his mental vision like a taunting omen of disaster. He was "all in," and Weegman knew it. The man had told him, with sneering bluntness, that his "old soup bone was on the blink." Yet, entertaining this settled conviction regarding Locke's worthlessness as a pitcher, Weegman had made a long and wearisome journey in order that he might be absolutely sure, by putting the deal through in person, of signing the southpaw for the Blue Stockings at an increased salary. The very fact that he had been offered the position of manager, under conditions that would make him a mere puppet without any real managerial authority, gave the proposition a blacker and more sinister look.

Sommers was signaling. Lefty shook his head to rid himself of that hateful chimera. Misunderstanding, the catcher quickly changed the sign. The pitcher delivered the ball called for first, and it went through Sommers like a fine shot through an open sieve.

Nuccio scored from third with ease, Bemis and O'Reilley advancing at the same time. The Wind Jammers roared from the

bench. Cap'n Wiley threw up his hands.

"Furl every stitch!" cried the manager of the visitors. "Batten the hatches! The storm is upon us! It's going to be a rip-sizzler. I'm afraid the wreck will be a total loss."

Covering the plate, Lefty took the ball from Sommers.

"How did you happen to cross me?" asked the catcher.

"It was my fault," was the prompt acknowledgment; "but it won't happen again."

"I hope not," said Sommers. He wanted to suggest that Locke should retire at once and let Matthews take up the pitching, but he refrained.

The southpaw was doing some serious thinking as he walked back to the mound. However well his newly acquired delivery had seemed to serve him on other occasions, he was convinced that it would not do now; either he must pitch in his own natural way and do his best, or he must retire and let Dade Matthews try to check the overconfident aggressors. If he retired, he would prolong the uncertainty in his own mind; he would leave himself in doubt as to whether or not there was any prospect of his return to the Big League as a twirler worthy of his hire. More than doubt, he realized, he would be crushed by a conviction that he was really down and out.

"I've pampered my arm long enough," he decided. "I'm going to find out if there's anything left in it."

Perhaps the decision was unwise. The result of the game with the Wind Jammers was of no importance, but Locke felt that,

for his own peace of mind, he must know what stuff was left in him. And there was no one present with authority, no coach, no counselor, to restrain him. There was a strange, new gleam in his eyes when he once more toed the slab. His faint smile had not vanished, but it had taken lines of grimness.

Schepps tapped the plate with his bat. "Come on, pal," he begged; "don't blow up. Gimme one of der real kind, an' lemme have a swat at it."

The crowd was silent; even the chattering darkies had ceased their noise. Only the Wind Jammers jubilated on the bench and the coaching lines.

Poising himself, Locke caught Sommer's signal, and nodded. Then he swung his arm with the old free, supple, whiplash motion, and the ball that left his fingers cut the air like a streak of white, taking a really remarkable hop. Schepps' "swat" was wasted.

"Now, dat's like it!" cried the sandlotter. "Where've you been keepin' dat kind, old boy? Gimme a duplicate."

Lefty watched Bemis, the long-legged ground coverer, working away toward the plate, and drove him back. But he seemed to have forgotten O'Reilley, and the Irishman was taking a lead on which he should have little trouble in scoring if Schepps drove out a safety. Farther and farther he crept up toward third.

Sommers tugged at his mask with an odd little motion. Like a flash the southpaw whirled about and shot the ball to second, knowing some one would be there to take the throw. Mel Gates

was the man who covered the bag, and O'Reilley found himself caught between second and third. Gates went after him, and the Irishman ran toward third. But Locke had cut in on the line, and he took a throw from Gates that caused O'Reilley to turn back abruptly. Behind Gates, Norris was covering the cushion. Tremain came down a little from third to back Lefty up.

Colby had raced from first base to the plate in order to support Sommers, for Bemis was swiftly creeping down to make a dash. On the coaching line, Cap'n Wiley did a wild dance. The spectators were thrilled by the sudden excitement of the moment.

Lefty ran O'Reilley back toward second, and he knew Bemis was letting himself out in an attempt to score. Swinging instantly, Locke made a rifle-accurate throw to Sommers, who jammed the ball on to the long-geared runner as he was sliding for the plate. The affair had been so skillfully managed that not only was O'Reilley prevented from advancing, but also the attempt to sneak a tally while the Irishman was being run down had resulted disastrously for the Wind Jammers.

"Dat's der only way dey can get us out," said Schepps. "Dis Lefty person looks to me like a lemon!"

Cap'n Wiley was philosophically cheerful. "Just a little lull in the tornado," he said. "It's due to strike again in a minute."

Lefty looked the confident Schepps over, and then he gave him a queer drop that deceived him even worse than the swift hopper. The spectators, who had been worried a short time before, now expressed their approval; and when, a minute later,

the southpaw whiffed the sandlotter, there was a sudden burst of handclapping and explosions of boisterous laughter from the delighted darkies.

“Wh-who’s dat man said lemon?” cried one. “Dat Lefty pusson sho’ handed him one dat time!”

“Is it possible,” said Cap’n Wiley, “that I’m going to be compelled to revise my dates regarding that wreck?” Then he roared at the Swede: “Get into the game, Oleson! It’s your watch on deck, and you want to come alive. The wrong ship’s being scuttled.”

“Aye, aye, captain!” responded Oleson. “Mebbe Ay do somethin’ when Ay get on the yob. Yust keep your eye on me.” Believing himself a hitter superior to the men who had touched Locke up so successfully at the beginning of the game, he strode confidently forth, for all of the failure of Schepps.

Sizing up the Swede, Lefty tested him with a curve, but Oleson betrayed no disposition to reach. A drop followed, and the batter fouled it. His style of swinging led the southpaw to fancy that he had a preference for drops, and therefore Locke wound the next one round his neck, puncturing his weakness. Not only did Oleson miss, but he swung in a manner that made it doubtful if he would drive the ball out of the infield if he happened to hit one of that kind.

“Hit it where you missed it!” implored Wiley. “Don’t let him bamboozle you with the chin wipers.” Then he turned on O’Reilly. “Cast off that mooring! Break your anchor loose and

get under way! Man the halyards and crack on every stitch! You've got to make port when Ole stings the horsehide."

In spite of himself, Lefty was compelled to laugh outright at the Marine Marvel's coaching contortions. "Calm yourself, cap'n," he advised. "The hurricane is over."

"How can I calm myself when calamity threatens?" was the wild retort. "You are a base deceiver, Lefty. Such chicanery is shameful! I don't know what chicanery means, but it seems to fit the offense."

And now the spectators fell to laughing at the swarthy little man, who did not seem to be so very offensive, after all, and who was injecting more than a touch of vaudeville comedy into the game.

Oleson waited patiently, still determined to hit, although somewhat dismayed by his two failures to gauge the left-hander's slants. But when Lefty suddenly gave him another exactly like the last, he slashed at it awkwardly and fruitlessly. The crowd broke into a cheer, and the Swede turned dazedly from the plate, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"That Lefty he bane some pitcher," admitted Oleson. "He got a good yump ball."

CHAPTER IX

TORTURING DOUBT

To a degree, Locke had satisfied himself that he still had command of his speed and curves; but the experience had also taught him that his efforts to acquire a new delivery as effective as his former style of pitching, and one that would put less strain upon his shoulder, had been a sheer waste of time. Working against batters who were dangerous, his artificial delivery had not enabled him to pitch the ball that would hold them in check. He had mowed them down, however, when he had resorted to his natural form.

But what would that do to his shoulder? Could he pitch like that and go the full distance with no fear of disastrous results? Should he attempt it, even should he succeed, perhaps the morrow would find him with his salary wing as weak and lame and lifeless as it had been after that last heart-breaking game in the Big League.

Involuntarily, as he left the mound, he looked around for Weegman, who had disappeared. It gave Lefty some satisfaction to feel that, for the time being, at least, he had wiped the mocking grin from the schemer's face.

Cap'n Wiley jogged down from third, an expression of injured reproof puckering his countenance. "I am pained to the apple

core,” he said. “My simple, trusting nature has received a severe shock. Just when I thought we had you meandering away from here, Lefty, you turned right round and came back. If you handed us that one lone tally to chirk us along, let me reassure you that you made the mistake of your young life; I am going to ascend the hillock and do some volleying, which makes it extensively probable that the run we have garnered will be sufficient to settle the game.”

“Don’t be so unfeeling!” responded Locke. “Give us Mysterious Jones.”

“Oh, perchance you may be able to get on the sacks with me pushing ’em over; but if Jones unlimbered his artillery on you, he’d mow you down as fast as you toddled up to the pentagon. You see, I wish the assemblage to witness some slight semblance of a game.”

In action upon the slab, Wiley aroused still further merriment. His wind-up before delivering the ball was most bewildering. His writhing, squirming twists would have made a circus contortionist gasp. First he seemed to tie himself into knots, pressing the ball into the pit of his stomach like a person in excruciating anguish. On the swing back, he turned completely away from the batter, facing second base for a moment, at the same time poising himself on his right foot and pointing his left foot toward the zenith. Then he came forward and around, as if he would put the sphere over with the speed of a cannon ball—and handed up a little, slow bender.

But he need not have troubled himself to put a curve on that first one, for Fred Hallett, leading off for the Grays, stood quite still and stared like a person hypnotized. The ball floated over, and the umpire called a strike, which led Hallett to shake himself and join in the laughter of the crowd.

“What’s the matter? What’s the matter?” spluttered Wiley. “Was my speed too much for you? Couldn’t you see it when it came across? Shall I pitch you a slow one?”

Hallett shook his head, unable to reply.

“Oh, vurry, vurry well,” said the Marine Marvel. “As you choose. I don’t want to be too hard on you.” Then, after going through with a startling variation of the former convulsions, he did pitch a ball that was so speedy that the batsman swung too slowly. And, a few minutes later, completing the performance to his own satisfaction, he struck Hallett out with a neat little drop. “I preen myself,” said he, “that I’m still there with the huckleberries. As a pitcher of class, I’ve got Matty and a few others backed up against the ropes. Bring on your next victim.”

Charlie Watson found the burlesque so amusing that he laughed all the way from the bench to the plate. The eccentric pitcher looked at him sympathetically.

“When you get through shedding tears,” he said, “I’ll pitch to you. I hate to see a strong man weep.”

Then, without the slightest warning, using no wind-up whatever, he snapped one straight over, catching Watson unprepared. That sobered Watson down considerably.

"I'm glad to see you feeling better," declared the manager of the Wind Jammers. "Now that you're quite prepared, I'll give you something easy."

The slow one that he tossed up seemed to hang in the air with the stitches showing. Watson hit it and popped a little fly into Wiley's hands, the latter not being compelled to move out of his tracks. He removed his cap and bowed his thanks.

Doc Tremain walked out seriously enough, apparently not at all amused by the horseplay that was taking place. With his hands on his hips, Wiley stared hard at Tremain.

"Here's a jolly soul!" cried the pitcher. "He's simply laughing himself sick. I love to see a man enjoy himself so diabolically."

"Oh, play ball!" the doctor retorted tartly. "This crowd isn't here to see monkeyshines."

"Then they won't look at you, my happy friend. And that's a dart of subtle repartee."

Wiley's remarkable wind-up and delivery did not seem to bother Tremain, who viciously smashed the first ball pitched to him. It was a savage line drive slightly to the left of the slabman, but the latter shot out his gloved hand with the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake, and grabbed the whistling sphere. Having made the catch, the Marine Marvel tossed the ball carelessly to the ground and sauntered toward the bench with an air of bored lassitude. There was a ripple of applause.

"You got off easy that time, cap'n," said Locke, coming out. "When are you going to let us have a crack at Jones?"

“A crack at him!” retorted Wiley. “Don’t make me titter, Lefty! Your assemblage of would-bes never could get anything remotely related to a crack off Jones. However, when ongwee begins to creep over me I’ll let him go in and polish you off.”

“Colonel” Rickey, leading off for the Wind Jammers in the second, hoisted an infield fly, and expressed his annoyance in a choice Southern drawl as he went back to the bench.

Peter Plum, the fat right fielder, followed, poling out an infield drive which, to the amazement of the crowd, he nearly turned into a safety by the most surprising dash to first. Impossible though it seemed, the chunky, short-legged fellow could run like a deer, and when he was cut down by little more than a yard at the hassock he vehemently protested that it was robbery.

Locke was taking it easy now; he almost seemed to invite a situation that would again put his arm to the test. There was a queer feeling in his shoulder, a feeling he did not like, and he wondered if he could “tighten” in repeated pinches, as he had so frequently done when facing the best batters in the business. But, though he grooved one to Schaeffer, the catcher boosted an easy fly to Watson in left field.

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