

Duffield J. W.

Bert Wilson's Fadeaway Ball



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CHAPTER I

Touching Second

Crack! – and the ball soared into center field, while the batter, swift as a flash, sped down to first. A tremendous roar went up from the thirty thousand loyal “fans” who packed the grandstands and filled the bleachers to overflowing. Staid citizens danced up and down like howling dervishes, hats were tossed into the air or jovially crushed on their owners’ heads, and happy riot reigned everywhere. Pandemonium broke loose.

The fight for the pennant had been a bitter one all season. First one team and then another had taken the lead, while the whole country had been as excited as though the fate of an empire hung in the balance. The third chief contender, fighting grimly to the last, had fallen hopelessly behind, and the contest had narrowed down to a life-and-death struggle between the Giants and the Cubs. The team from the Western city had hung on doggedly and every battle had been fought “for blood.” Contesting every inch, they had at last drawn up on even terms with the leaders, and to-day’s game was to decide which club should be hailed as champions of the National League and, later on, do battle with the leaders of the American League for the proud title of Champions of the World.

The excitement was intense, and, to a foreigner, would have been inconceivable. Men stood in line all the night before to make sure of tickets when the gates should open in the morning. The newspapers devoted columns of space to the gladiators of the opposing teams. Delegations poured in on special trains from neighboring cities. The surface cars and elevated trains, packed to the limit, rolled up to the grounds and deposited their sweltering throngs. The lines of ticket buyers extended for blocks, and the speculators did a rushing business. Long before the hour set for the game to begin, the grounds were crowded to suffocation, and thousands, unable to get in, were turned away from the gates.

The scene within was inspiring. A band played popular airs, while those within hearing joined lustily in the chorus. The great field, gleaming like green velvet beneath the afternoon sun, had been especially groomed and rolled for this day of days. The base lines, freshly marked, stood out in white and dazzling relief. All four sides of the huge enclosure held their thousands of enthusiasts, and the host of special policemen had their hands full to keep them from encroaching on the diamond. As each white-uniformed athlete of the home team came from the club house for preliminary practice, he was boisterously and affectionately greeted.

Nor did the gray-clad visitors come short of a cordial reception. The great crowd hoped that the home team would win, but they were fair, and, mingled with the good-natured chaffing, was a wholesome respect and fear of their prowess. Above all they wanted a rattling game and a hair-raising finish, with the Giants winning “by an eyelash.”

The bell rang. The Giants took their places in the field and the umpire cried “Play ball!” The head of the Cubs’ batting order came to the plate and the game was on. From the start it was a battle “for keeps.” Both teams were “on their toes.” It meant not only honor but lucre. The winners would contest in the World’s Series, and this meant thousands of dollars for every player. Every point was bitterly fought, and plays were made that under other circumstances would not even have been attempted. For eight innings, Fortune divided her favors equally, and it looked as though the game were destined to go into extra innings.

The Cubs were easily disposed of in their half of the ninth, and the Giants came to the bat. The crowd, which had been alternately on the heights of hope or in the depths of despair, rose to their feet and cheered them wildly. The batters were frantically besought to “hit it on the seam,” “give the ball a ride,” “show them where you live.” The players responded nobly. By the time that two were out, a Giant was perched on third and another on first. The shortstop, a sure hitter in a pinch, strode to the plate. Now, indeed, excitement was at fever heat. A safe hit into the outfield would bring the man on third to the plate with the winning run.

The visitors were plainly worried. The “Peerless Leader” came in from first, ostensibly to advise the pitcher, but really to give him a moment’s rest before the final test. Hoots of derision showed the spectators’ appreciation of the trick. The pitcher glanced at the man dancing about third, wound up deliberately and let the ball go with all the force of his brawny arm. The batter caught it squarely “on the trademark” and shot it like a rifle bullet into center field, while the man on third tore down the line and came like a racehorse to the plate. He crossed the rubber with the winning run, and thirty thousand men went stark, raving mad.

The man on first ran part way toward second, and then, seeing that his comrade would certainly score, turned and scurried to the club house in right field. The jubilant crowd began to invade the diamond. Suddenly the second baseman of the visitors secured the ball, rushed to his base, and then, surrounded by his teammates, ran toward the umpire, waving his hands wildly.

The crowd, at first bewildered, then angered, soon became panic-stricken. Few of them understood the nature of the claim. They only felt that the hard-won victory was being called in question, and a tidal wave of wrath and resentment swept over the field.

The point made by the quick-witted second baseman was simple, but sufficiently important to engage the grave attention of the umpires. His contention was that the man on first had not touched second base, and, as he was legally compelled to leave first in order to make room for the batter and had not touched second before the ball got there, he was *forced out*, and therefore the run didn’t count. The rules on this point were clear and explicit. If the claim was granted, three men were out, no run had come in and the score was still a tie at one to one.

The final decision was held in suspense, and the throng passed out, more like a funeral than a triumphal procession. Disputes were rife among heated partisans, and in all the vast city that night and, in a lesser degree, in every city from New York to San Francisco, the game was fought over and over again. The unfortunate first baseman almost lost his mind over the blunder. There was more pity than bitterness felt toward him, however, as it was known that he had merely followed a general custom that had been taken as a matter of course.

Among the crowd that filed out of the gates were Bert Wilson and his inseparable friends, Dick Trent and Tom Henderson. With them also was a Mr. Hollis, a gentleman much older than they in years, but quite as young in spirit. He had been in charge of the summer camp from which the boys had recently returned, and the respect and confidence that his sterling character evoked had become steadily stronger. They were all very fond of the great national game, and had shared the enthusiasm over the supposed victory of the home team. Now, from the reaction, their ardor was correspondingly dampened.

“There’s no use talking,” broke out Tom hotly, “it was a low down trick. They couldn’t beat us with the bat, so they try to do it on a quibble.”

“I don’t know,” said Dick, “it’s about a stand off. We may have been a little bit better off in brawn, but they had it on us in the matter of brain. Whatever we may think of their sportsmanship, their wits were not wool gathering.”

“And after all,” chimed in Bert, “it is brain that counts to-day in baseball as well as in everything else. More and more, the big leaguers are putting a premium on quick thinking. The mere ‘sand lot slugger’ is going to the rear, and the college man is coming to the front. It isn’t that the collegian is necessarily any brainier, but he has been taught how to use his brains. This is simply a case where

the husky hit of the Giants' short-stop was wasted because of the nimble wit of the Cubs' second baseman. It was hit against wit, and wit won out."

"All the same," maintained Tom, "it was taking advantage of a technicality. The same thing has been done a hundred times, and there has never been a kick about it. Whenever a player has been sure that the winning run has come in, he has considered it all over, and made a break for the clubhouse. I don't think the question has ever been raised before."

"Yes it has," said Mr. Hollis. "That same quick thinker made a point of it the other day in Pittsburgh, and that is all the more reason why the home team ought to have been wide awake. But there is nothing to be gained by post mortems, and anyway the thing isn't settled yet. It looks rather bad for us now, but there will be a full discussion of the matter and the umpires may find something in the rules that will cover the case and give us the run. Even if they don't, it leaves it a tie, and the game will have to be played over. We may win then and get the pennant after all."

"I hope so," said Tom, "but just at present I know how they felt in Mudville:

"O somewhere birds are singing and somewhere children shout,
But there's no joy in Mudville – mighty Casey has struck out."

A few days later when the point had been decided in favor of the Cubs and the game played over, only to result in a conclusive victory for the men from the shore of Lake Michigan, the chums met in Bert's rooms.

"Well," said Dick, "I see that they put it over, all right. They've copped the pennant and we are only an 'also ran.'"

"Yes," replied Tom, "that hit by Tinker over Seymour's head did the business. But there's no use crying over spilt milk. We'll stand them on their heads next year and get even."

"By the way, Bert," asked Dick, changing the subject, "have you heard from your examinations yet? How did you make out?"

"Fine," answered Bert. "I heard from the Dean this morning and he says that I passed with something to spare. The chemical and electrical marks were especially good. He says that the questions along those lines were unusually severe, but they didn't strike me that way. I suppose it's because I'm so interested in them that they come easy."

"Good for you, old scout," cried Dick, delightedly. "I'm tickled to death that the thing is settled. You'll find that we have one of the finest scientific schools in the country. I've been there a year now, and it's come to seem like home. I'll show you the ropes and we'll room together. I only wish Tom here were coming along with us next week."

"So do I," said Tom ruefully, "but Father seems to think I'd better stick to my engineering course right here in New York. It isn't that he thinks the course is any better than at your college, if as good. I suppose the real reason is that he wants me to be where I can live at home. I'm going to get Mr. Hollis to have a talk with him. Perhaps he can show him that it would be a good thing for me to get away from home and be thrown on my own responsibility. Dad's pretty stubborn when he gets an idea in his head, but he thinks a lot of Mr. Hollis, and what he says will go a long way with him."

It was a wholesome group of young fellows that thus discussed their future plans. They were the best type of manly, red-blooded American youth, full of energy and ambition and alive to their finger tips. Tom was of medium height, while Bert and Dick were fully six feet tall. All were strongly built and looked as though they could give a good account of themselves in any contest, whether of mind or body. A similarity of tastes and habits had drawn them closely together, and among their friends they were jokingly referred to as the "Three Guardsmen." They were rarely apart, and now their plans for the coming school year were destined to cement their friendship still more firmly. In reality with them it was "one for all and all for one."

All of them had chosen their life work along practical and scientific lines. The literary professions did not tempt them strongly. Dick, who was the elder, was preparing to become a mining engineer, and had already spent a year at college with that end in view. Tom aimed at civil engineering while Bert was strongly drawn toward electrical science and research. This marvelous field had a fascination for him that he could not resist. His insight was so clear, he leaped so intuitively from cause to conclusion, that it was felt that it would be almost a crime if he were not permitted to have every advantage that the best scientific schools could give him. For a long time past he had been studying nights, preparing for his entrance examinations, and now that he had passed them triumphantly, nothing intervened between him and his cherished ambition.

Absorbed as he was in his studies, however, he spent enough time in athletic sports to keep himself in superb physical condition. His was the old Greek ideal of a “sound mind in a sound body.” His favorite sport was baseball, and, like most healthy young Americans, he was intensely fond of the great game. In public school and high school he had always “made the team.” Although at times he had played every position in the infield and outfield and behind the bat, he soon gravitated towards the pitcher’s box, and for the last three years had played that position steadily. He was easily the best “flinger” in the Inter-Scholastic League, and had received more than one invitation to join some of the semi-professional teams that abound in the great city. He elected, however, to remain purely and simply an amateur. Even when a “big league” scout, who had watched him play, gave him a quiet tip that his club would take him on the Spring training trip to Texas and pay all his expenses, with a view to finding out whether he was really “major league timber,” the offer did not tempt him. He had no idea of making a business of his chosen sport, but simply a pleasant though strenuous recreation. With him, it was “sport for sport’s sake”; the healthy zest of struggle, the sheer physical delight in winning.

And now, as they talked over the coming year, the athletic feature also came to the fore.

“I wonder if I’ll have the slightest show to make the baseball team,” said Bert. “I suppose, as a newcomer I’ll be a rank outsider.”

“Don’t you believe that for a minute,” replied Dick warmly. “Of course there’ll be lots of competition and a raft of material to pick from. I suppose when the coach sends out the call for candidates in the Spring, there’ll be dozens of would-be players and a bunch too of have-beens that will trot out on the diamond to be put through their paces. One thing is certain, though, and that is that you’ll get your chance. There may be a whole lot of snobbery in college life – though there isn’t half as much as people think – but, out on the ball field, it’s a pure democracy. The only question there is whether you can deliver the goods. If you can, they don’t care whether you’re a new man or an old-timer. All they want is a winner.”

“Well,” chimed in Tom, “they’ll find that they have one in Bert. Just show them a little of the ‘big medicine’ you had in that last game with Newark High when you put out the side on three pitched balls. Gee, I never saw a more disgusted bunch of ball tossers. Just when they thought they had the game all sewed up and put away in their bat bag, too.”

“That’s all right,” said Bert, “but you must remember that those high school fellows were a different proposition from a bunch of seasoned old college sluggers. When I come up against them, if I ever do, they’ll probably smash the back fences with the balls I feed to them.”

“Some of them certainly can slaughter a pitcher’s curves,” laughed Dick. “Old Pendleton, for instance, would have the nerve to start a batting rally against three-fingered Brown, and Harry Lord wouldn’t be hypnotized even if Matty glared at him.”

“I understand you did some fence breaking yourself last Spring on the scrubs,” said Tom. “Steve Thomas told me you were the heaviest batter in college.”

“O, I don’t know,” returned Dick modestly, “I led them in three-base hits and my batting average was .319, but Pendleton was ahead of me in the matter of home runs. I hope to do better next Spring, though, as Ainslee, the coach, gave me some valuable tips on hitting them out. At first I swung too much and tried to knock the cover off the ball. The result was that when I did hit the ball it certainly

traveled some. But many a time I missed them because I took too long a swing. Ainslee showed me how to chop at the ball with a sharp, quick stroke that caught it just before the curve began to break. Then all the power of my arms and shoulders leaned up against the ball at just the right second. Ainslee says that Home-Run Baker uses that method altogether, and you know what kind of a hitter he is. I got it down pretty fine before the season ended, and if I make the team next Spring – ”

“If you make it,” said Bert incredulously. “As though it wasn’t a dead certainty.”

“Not a bit of it,” protested Dick, seriously. “You never can tell from year to year. You can’t live on your reputation at college. There may be a regular Hal Chase among the new recruits, and he may win the first base position over me without half trying. It’s a good thing it is so, too, because we have to keep hustling all the time or see somebody else step into our shoes. The result is that when the team is finally licked into shape by the coaches, it represents the very best the college can turn out. It’s a fighting machine that never knows when it is whipped and never quits trying until the last man is out in the ninth inning.”

“Yes,” broke in Tom, “and that’s what makes college baseball so much more pleasing than the regular professional game. The fellows go at it in such deadly earnest. It is the spirit of Napoleon’s Marshal: ‘The Old Guard dies, but never surrenders.’ The nine may be beaten, but not disgraced, and, when the game is over, the winning team always knows that it has been in a fight.”

“Well,” said Bert, as the fellows rose to go, “if we do make the team, it won’t be through lack of trying if we fail to land the pennant.”

“No,” laughed Dick. “Our epitaph at least will be that of the Texas cowboy,

“‘He done his blamedest – angels can no more.’”

A week later, the three friends – for Tom and Mr. Hollis had won his father over – stood on the deck of a Sound steamer, saying goodby to those who had come to see them off. Mr. Hollis wrung Bert’s hand, just as the last bell rang and he prepared to go down the gangway.

“Good luck, Bert, and whatever else you do, don’t forget to touch second.”

He smiled at Bert’s puzzled expression, and added: “I mean, my boy, be thorough in all you do. End what you begin. Don’t be satisfied with any half-way work. Many a man has made a brilliant start, but a most dismal finish. In work, in play, in the whole great game of life – touch second.”

CHAPTER II

“Making the Team”

The Fall and Winter passed quickly. Bert and Dick roomed together in one of the dormitories close to the main buildings, while Tom had his quarters on the floor below. The feeling of strangeness, inevitable at the start, soon wore off, and they quickly became a part of the swarming life that made the college a little world of its own.

Here, too, as in the greater world outside, Bert found all sorts and conditions. There were the rich and the poor, the polished and the uncouth, the lazy and the energetic, good fellows and bad. But the good predominated. The great majority were fine, manly fellows, sound to the core. Dick's wide acquaintanceship with them and his familiarity with college customs were immensely helpful to Bert from the beginning, and he was soon a general favorite.

The football season had been a triumphant one, and another gridiron championship had been added to the many that had preceded it. There had been a surplus of good material left over from the year before, and the time was so short that Bert had not tried for the team. At the outset, too, his studies taxed him so heavily that he did not feel justified in giving the necessary attention to the great game, that, in his estimation, almost divided honors with baseball. He had done a little playing with the scrubs, however, and on his class team, and the qualities he displayed in “bucking the line” had marked him out to the coaches, as a factor to be reckoned with in the following seasons.

The Christmas holidays had come and gone almost before he knew it, and when he returned for his second term, he buckled down to work with all his might. His chosen field of electricity held constant surprises for him, as it became more familiar. If he had any specialty, it was wireless telegraphy. There was an irresistible attraction in the mysterious force that bound the ends of the earth together by an electric spark, that leaped over oceans with no conductor but the air, that summoned help for sinking vessels when all other hope was gone. He felt that the science was as yet only in its infancy, and that it held untold possibilities for the future. The splendidly equipped laboratories gave him every opportunity and encouragement for original work, and his professors foresaw a brilliant future for the enthusiastic young student.

Spring came early that year. A soft wind blew up from the south, the sun shone warmly on the tender grass, the sap stirred blindly in the trees. It stirred also in the veins of the lusty college youth and called them to the outdoor life.

Going down the hall, one morning, to his recitation room, Bert came across an eager group surrounding the bulletin board. He crowded nearer and saw that it was the call of the coach to baseball candidates to report on the following day. His heart leaped in response and the morrow seemed long in coming.

Dressed in the old baseball togs that had done yeoman service on many a hard-fought field, he with Dick and Tom, who were quite as eager as himself, reported for the tryout. Perhaps a hundred ambitious youngsters were on hand, all aflame with desire to make the team and fight for the glory of Alma Mater. It was apparent at a glance, however, that many had ambition but nothing else. The qualities that had made them heroes on some village nine were plainly inadequate, when it came to shaping up for a college team. The hopes of many faded away when they saw the plays made by the seasoned veterans, who nonchalantly “ate up” balls and did stunts in practice that would have called out shouts of applause in a regular game. But whether marked for acceptance or rejection, all were as frolicsome as colts turned out to pasture. It was good to be young and to be alive.

The coach threaded his way through the groups with an eye that apparently saw nothing, but, in reality, saw everything. He was a famous pitcher, known from one end of the country to the other. Himself an old-time graduate, he had the confidence of the faculty and the unbounded respect and

admiration of the students. He had been given full charge and was an absolute autocrat. Whatever he said “went,” and from his decision there was no appeal. He played no favorites, was not identified with any clique, and his sole desire was to duplicate the success of the preceding season and turn out a winner.

To do this, he realized, would be no easy task. While his two chief rivals had maintained their strong teams almost intact, his own was “shot to pieces.” Three had graduated, and they were among his heaviest hitters. Good old Pendleton, who had been a tower of strength at first base, who could take them with equal ease to right or left and “dig them out of the dirt,” and whose hard slugging had many a time turned defeat into victory, would be hard to replace. His pitching staff was none too good. Winters lacked control, and Benson’s arm was apt to give out about the seventh inning. Hinsdale was a good backstop, but his throwing to second was erratic. They had done too much stealing on him last year. Barry would be sadly missed at third, and it would be mighty hard to find a capable guardian for the “difficult corner.” It was clear that he faced a tough problem, and the only solution was to be found, if at all, in the new material.

As he glanced musingly around his eyes fell on Bert. They rested there. He knew a thoroughbred when he saw one, and this was undeniably a thoroughbred. The lithe form, supple as a leopard’s, the fine play of shoulder muscles that the uniform could not conceal, the graceful but powerful swing, the snap with which the ball shot from his fingers as though released by a spring – all these he noticed in one practised glance. He sauntered over to where Bert was pitching.

“Done much in the pitching line?” he asked carelessly.

“A little,” answered Bert modestly, “only on high school nines though.”

“What have you got in stock?” asked the coach.

“Not much besides the old ‘roundhouse’ curve,” replied Bert. “I don’t think so much of my incurve, though I’m trying to make it break a little more sharply. I can do a little ‘moist’ flinging, too, though I haven’t practised that much.”

“Don’t,” said the coach. “Cut out the spitball. It’s bound to hurt your arm in the long run. Trot out your curve and let’s have a look at it. Easy now,” he said as Bert wound up, “don’t put too much speed in it. You’ll have plenty of chances to do that later on.”

The ball left Bert’s hand with a jerk, and, just before it reached the center of the plate, swept in a sharp, tremendous curve to the outside, so that the catcher just touched it with the end of his fingers.

“Not so bad,” commented the coach carelessly, though his eyes lighted up. “Here, Drake,” he called to a burly veteran who was looking on with interest, “take your wagon tongue and straighten out this youngster’s curves.”

The good-natured giant, thus addressed, picked up his bat and came to the plate.

“Get it over the plate now, kid, and I’ll kill it,” he grinned.

A little flustered by this confidence, Bert sent one in waist high, just cutting the corner. Drake swung at it and missed it by six inches.

“One strike,” laughed the coach, and Drake, looking a little sheepish, set himself for the next.

“Give him a fast one now, shoulder high,” ordered the coach. Again the ball sped toward the plate and Drake struck at it after it had passed him and thudded into the catcher’s glove.

“Gee, I can’t hit them if I can’t see them,” he protested, and the coach chuckled.

“No,” he said, as Bert poised himself for a third pitch, “no more just now. I don’t want you to throw your arm out at practice. There are other days coming, and you won’t complain of lack of work. Come out again to-morrow,” and he walked away indifferently, while his heart was filled with exultation. If he had not unearthed a natural-born pitcher, he knew nothing about ball players.

Drake was more demonstrative. While Bert was putting on his sweater, he came up and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Say, Freshie,” he broke out, “that was a dandy ball you whiffed me with. You certainly had me guessing. If that swift one you curled around my neck had hit me, I would have been seeing stars

and hearing the birdies sing. And I nearly broke my back reaching for that curve. You've surely got something on the ball."

"Oh, you'd have got me all right, if I'd kept on," answered Bert. "That was probably just a fluke, and I was lucky enough to get away with it."

"Well, you can call it a fluke if you like," rejoined Drake, "but to me it looked suspiciously like big league pitching. Go to it, my boy, and I'll root for you to make the team."

Bert flushed with pleasure at this generous meed of praise, doubly grateful as coming from an upper class man and hero of the college diamond. Dick coming up just then, they said good-by to Drake and started toward their dormitory.

"What's this I hear about you, Bert?" asked Dick; "you've certainly made yourself solid with Ainslee. I accidentally heard him telling one of the assistant coaches that, while of course he couldn't be sure until he'd tried you out a little more, he thought he'd made a find."

"One swallow doesn't make a summer," answered Bert. "I had Drake buffaloed all right, but I only pitched two balls. He might knock me all over the lot to-morrow."

"Sufficient unto the day are the hits thereof," rejoined Dick; "the fact is that he *didn't* hit you, and he has the surest eye in college. If he had fouled them, even, it would have been different, but Ainslee said he missed them by a mile. And even at that you weren't at full speed, as he told you not to cut loose to-day."

"Well," said Bert, "if the lightning strikes my way, all right. But now I've got to get busy on my 'Sci' work, or I'll surely flunk to-morrow."

The next day Bert was conscious of sundry curious glances when he went out for practice. News travels fast in a college community and Drake had passed the word that Ainslee had uncovered a "phenom." But the coach had other views and was in no mood to satisfy their curiosity. He had turned the matter over in his mind the night before and resolved to bring Bert along slowly. To begin with, while delighted at the boy's showing on the first time out, he realized that this one test was by no means conclusive. He was naturally cautious. He was "from Missouri" and had to be "shown." A dozen questions had to be answered, and, until they were, he couldn't reach any definite decision. Did the boy have stamina enough to last a full game? Was that wonderful curve of his under full control? Was his heart in the right place, or, under the tremendous strain of a critical game, would he go to pieces? Above all, was he teachable, willing to acknowledge that he did not "know it all," and eager to profit by the instruction that would be handed out in the course of the training season? If all these questions could be answered to his satisfaction, he knew that the most important of all his problems – that of the pitcher's box – was already solved, and that he could devote his attention to the remaining positions on the team.

Pursuing this plan of "hastening slowly," he cut out all "circus" stunts in this second day's practice. Bert was instructed to take it easy, and confine himself only to moderately fast straight balls, in order to get the kinks out of his throwing arm. Curves were forbidden until the newness wore off and his arm was better able to stand the strain. The coach had seen too many promising young players ruined in trying to rush the season, and he did not propose to take any such chances with his new find.

His keen eyes sparkled, as from his position behind the pitcher, he noted the mastery that Bert had over the ball. He seemed to be able to put it just where he wished. Whether the coach called for a high or a low ball, straight over the center of the plate or just cutting the corners, the ball obeyed almost as though it were a living thing. Occasionally it swerved a little from the exact "groove" that it was meant to follow, but in the main, as Ainslee afterward confided to his assistant, "the ball was so tame that it ate out of his hand."

He was far too cautious to say as much to Bert. Of all the dangers that came to budding pitchers, the "swelled head" was the one he most hated and detested.

"Well," he said as he pretended to suppress a yawn, "your control is fairly good for a beginner. Of course I don't know how it will be on the curves, but we'll try them out too before long."

“That,” he went on warming to his subject, “is the one thing beyond all others you want to work for. No matter how much speed you’ve got or how wide your curve or how sharp your break, it doesn’t amount to much, unless you can put the ball where you want it to go. Of course, you don’t want to put every ball over the plate. You want to make them ‘bite’ at the wide ones. But when you are ‘in the hole,’ when there are two strikes and three balls, the winning pitcher is the one that nine times out of ten can cut the plate, and do it so surely that the umpire will have no chance to call it a ball. One of the greatest pitchers I ever knew was called the ‘Curveless Wonder.’ He didn’t have either an incurve or an outcurve that was worth mentioning. But he had terrific speed, and such absolute ability to put the ball just where he wanted it, that for years he stood right among the headliners in the major leagues. Take my word for it, Wilson, a pitcher without control is like the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out. Don’t forget that.”

The respect with which Bert listened was deepened by his knowledge that Ainslee was himself famous, the country over, in this same matter of control. A few more comments on minor points, and the coach walked away to watch the practice of his infield candidates.

Now that Pendleton had graduated, the logical successor of the great first baseman seemed to be Dick Trent, who had held the same position on the scrubs the year before, and who had pressed Pendleton hard for the place. The first base tradition demands that it be occupied by a heavy batter, and there was no doubt that in this particular Dick filled the bill. His average had been well above the magic .300 figures that all players covet, and now that he had conquered his propensity to excessive swinging, he might fairly be expected to better these figures this year. As a fielder, he was a sure catch on thrown balls either to right or left, and his height and reach were a safe guarantee that not many wild ones would get by him. He was lightning quick on double plays, and always kept his head, even in the most exciting moments of the game. If he had any weakness, it was, perhaps, that he did not cover quite as deep a field as Pendleton used to, but that was something that careful coaching could correct. None of the other candidates seemed at all above the average, and, while yet keeping an open mind, the coach mentally slated Dick for the initial bag.

Second and short, as he said to himself with a sigh of relief, were practically provided for. Sterling at the keystone bag and White at shortfield were among the brightest stars of the college diamond, and together with Barry and Pendleton had formed the famous “stonewall” infield that last year had turned so many sizzling hits to outs.

Barry – ah, there was a player! A perfect terror on hard hit balls, a fielder of bunts that he had never seen excelled, even among professional players. He remembered the screeching liner that he had leaped into the air and pulled down with one hand, shooting it down to first for a double play in the last game of the season. It had broken up a batting rally and saved the game when it seemed lost beyond redemption.

Well, there were as good fish in the sea as ever were caught, and no man was so good but what another just as good could be found to take his place. But where to find him? There was the rub. That cub trying out now at third – what was his name? – he consulted the list in his hand – oh, yes, Henderson – he rather fancied his style. He certainly handled himself like a ball player. But there – you never could tell. He might simply be another “false alarm.”

At this moment the batter sent a scorching grounder toward third, but a little to the left of the base. Tom flung himself toward it, knocked it down with his left hand, picked it up with the right and scarcely waiting to get “set” shot it like a flash to first. The coach gasped at the scintillating play, and White called out:

“Classy stuff, kid, classy stuff. That one certainly had whiskers on it.”

“Hey, there, Henderson,” yelled the coach, “go easy there. Float them down. Do you want to kill your arm with that kind of throwing?”

But to himself he said: "By George, what a 'whip' that fellow's got. That ball didn't rise three inches on the way to first. And it went into Drake knee high. That youngster will certainly bear watching."

And watch him he did with the eye of a hawk, not only that afternoon, but for several weeks thereafter until the hope became a certainty that he had found a worthy successor to the redoubtable Barry, and his infield would be as much of a "stonewall" that season as the year before. With Hodge in right, Flynn in center and Drake in left, his outfield left nothing to be desired, either from a fielding or batting point of view, and he could now devote himself entirely to the development of his batteries.

Under his masterly coaching, Bert advanced with great rapidity. He had never imagined that there was so much in the game. He learned from this past-master in the art how to keep the batter "hugging first"; the surest way of handling bunts; the quick return of the ball for the third strike before the unsuspecting batter can get "set," and a dozen other features of "inside stuff" that in a close game might easily turn the scale. Ainslee himself often toed the plate and told Bert to send in the best he had. His arm had attained its full strength, under systematic training, and he was allowed to use his curves, his drop, his rise ball and the swift, straight one that, as Flynn once said, "looked as big as a balloon when it left his hand, but the size of a pea when it crossed the plate."

One afternoon, when Ainslee had taken a hand in the batting practice, Bert fed him an outcurve, and the coach smashed it to the back fence. A straight high one that followed it met with no better fate. It was evident that Ainslee had his "batting eye" with him that afternoon, and could not be easily fooled.

"Send in the next," he taunted, good-naturedly, "I don't think you can outguess me to-day."

A little nettled at his discomfiture, Bert wound up slowly. For some time past he had been quietly trying out a new delivery that he had stumbled upon almost by accident. He called it his "freak" ball. He had thrown it one day to Dick, when, after the regular practice, they were lazily tossing the ball to and fro. It had come in way below where Dick's hands were waiting for it, and the latter was startled. It was a "lulu," he said emphatically. It could not be classed with any of the regulation curves. Bert had kept it under cover until he could get perfect control of it. Now he had got it to the point where he could put it just where he wanted it, and as he looked at the smiling face of the coach he resolved to "uncork" it.

He took a long swing and let it go. It came to the plate like a bullet, hesitated, slowed, then dropped down and in, a foot below the wild lunge that the coach made for it. His eyes bulged, and he almost dropped the bat.

"What was that?" he asked. "How did you do it? Put over another one."

A second one proved just as puzzling, and the coach, throwing his bat aside, came down to the pitcher's box. He was clearly excited.

"Now, what was it?" he asked; "it wasn't an incurve, a drop, or a straight, but a sort of combination of them all. It was a new one on me. How do you hold your hand when you throw it?"

"Why," replied Bert, "when I throw it, the palm is held toward the ground instead of toward the sky, as it is when I pitch an outcurve. The wrist is turned over and the hand held down with the thumb toward the body, so that when the ball slips off the thumb with a twisting motion it curves in toward the batter. I grip it in the same way as an outcurve. Just as it twists off the thumb I give it a sharp snap of the wrist. It spins up to the plate, goes dead, then curves sharply down and in."

"Well," said the coach, "it's certainly a dandy. We must develop it thoroughly, but we'll do it on the quiet. I rather think we'll have a surprise for 'our friends the enemy,' when the race begins. It's just as well to have an ace up our sleeve. That ball is in a class by itself. It just seems to melt while you are trying to locate it. If I were to give it a name at all, I'd call it a 'fadeaway.'"

And so Bert's new delivery was christened. As they walked back to the college both were exultant. They would have been still more so, if at that moment they had begun to realize the havoc and dismay that would be spread among their opponents before the season ended by Bert's fadeaway ball.

CHAPTER III

The “Inside” Game

“Well, Tom, I see that you lead off in the batting order,” said Bert, as they sat in his rooms at the close of the day’s work.

“Yes,” said Tom, “Ainslee seems to think that I am a good waiter, as well as a pretty fair sprinter, and I suppose that is the reason he selected me.”

““They also serve who only stand and wait,”” recited Dick, who was always ready with an apt quotation.

“Well,” laughed Bert, “I don’t suppose the poet ever dreamed of that application, but, all the same, it is one of the most important things in the game to lead off with a man who has nerve and sense enough to wait. In the first place, the pitcher is apt to be a little wild at the start and finds it hard to locate the plate. I know it’s an awful temptation to swing at a good one, if it is sandwiched in between a couple of wild ones, and, of course, you always stand the chance of being called out on strikes. But at that stage of the game he is more likely to put over four balls than three strikes, and if you do trot down to first, you’ve got three chances of reaching home. A sacrifice will take you down to second, and then with only one man out and two good batters coming up, a single to the outfield brings you home.”

“Then, too, you went around the bases in fifteen seconds flat, the other day,” said Dick, “and that’s some running. I noticed Ainslee timing you with his split-second watch, and when he put it back in his pocket he was smiling to himself.”

“Flynn comes second, I see,” said Bert, consulting his list, “and that’s a good thing too. He is one of the best ‘place’ hitters on the team. He has the faculty that made Billy Keeler famous, of ‘hitting them where they ain’t.’ He’s a dandy too at laying down a bunt, just along the third-base line. If any man can advance you to second, Flynn can.”

“Yes,” said Tom, “with Drake up next, swinging that old wagon tongue of his, and then Dick coming on as a clean-up hitter, it will have to be pretty nifty pitching that will keep us from denting the home plate.”

“Last year the team had a general batting average of .267,” chimed in Dick. “If we can match that this year, I guess there’ll be no complaint. As a matter of fact, however, I’m a little dubious of doing that, especially with old Pendleton off the team. But if we come short a little there, I am counting on Bert holding down the batters on the other nines enough to make up for it.”

“If I get a chance, I’ll do my very best,” said Bert, “but perhaps I won’t pitch in a regular game all season. You know how it is with a Freshman. He may have to sit on the bench all the time, while the upper class pitchers take their turn in the box. They’ve won their spurs and I haven’t. They’ve ‘stood the gaff’ under the strain of exciting games, and pulled victories out of the fire. I might do it too, but nobody knows that, and I probably would not be called on to go in the box, except as a last resort. They may believe that I have the curve, but they are not at all sure that I have the nerve. Winters and Benson are going along now like a house afire, and if they are at top speed when the season begins I’ll see the pennant won or lost from my seat on the bench.”

“Neither one of them has anything on you,” maintained Tom stoutly. “Of course they are, in a certain sense, veterans, and then, too, they have the advantage of having faced before many of the players on the other teams. That counts for a lot, but you must remember that Hinsdale has caught for the last two years, and he knows these things as well as the pitchers. He knows their weak and their strong points, the ones that simply kill a low outcurve, but are as helpless as babies before a high fast one. He could quickly put you on to the batters’ weakness. But outside of that you’ve got them

faded. You have more speed than Winters and more endurance than Benson. Neither one of them has a license to beat you at any stage of the pitching game.”

“Perhaps it’s your friendship rather than your judgment that’s talking now, Tom,” smiled Bert.

“No,” said Dick, “it isn’t. Tom’s right. You’ve got everything that they have, and then some. Winters’ rise ball is certainly a peach, but it hasn’t the quick jump yours has just before it gets to the plate. My eye isn’t so bad, but in practice I bat under it every time. Even when I don’t miss it altogether, I hit it on the underside and raise a fly to the fielders. It’s almost impossible to line it out. And your fast high one is so speedy that a fellow backs away from the plate when he sees it coming. I don’t know that your outcurve is any better than Benson’s, but you certainly have it under better control.”

“On the dead quiet,” he went on, “I’m rather worried about Winters this year, anyway. I think he’s gone back. He’s in with a fast bunch, and I fear has been going the pace. His fine work in the box last year made him a star and turned his head. It brought him a lot of popularity, and I’m afraid he isn’t the kind that can stand prosperity. He doesn’t go at his work in the right spirit this year. You all saw how he shirked the other day when we were training for wind.”

They readily recalled the incident to which Dick alluded. The practice had been strenuous that day, but the coach had been insistent. As a wind up, he had called for a run around the track to perfect their wind and endurance, as well as to get off some of the superfluous flesh that still interfered with their development. The players were tired, but, as the trainer didn’t ask them to do what he was unwilling to do himself, they lined up without protest and trotted behind him around the track.

At one place, there was a break in the fence which had not yet been repaired. Twice they made the circuit of the track, and some of them were blowing hard, when the relentless leader started on the third round. As they came abreast of the break, Winters, with a wink, slipped out of the line and got behind the fence. Here he stayed, resting, while the others jogged along. They made two circuits more, and when they came to where he was, Winters, fresh as a daisy, and grinning broadly, slipped into line again, and trotted along as though nothing had happened. The joke seemed certainly on the coach, who hadn’t once turned his head, but pounded steadily along, in apparent unconsciousness that one of his sheep had not been following his leader. At the bench, after the sixth round, he slowed up.

“Good work, boys,” he said pleasantly, “that makes six full laps for all of us except Winters. We’ll wait here, while he takes his other two.”

The grin faded from Winters’ face, to be replaced by a hot flush, as his eyes fell before the steady look of the coach. There was no help for it, however. He had been caught “red-handed,” and with a sheepish glance at his laughing comrades, he started on his lonely run around the course while they stood and watched him. Twice he made the circuit and then rejoined his companions. The coach said nothing more, as he felt that the culprit had been punished enough, but the story was too good to keep, and Winters was “joshed” unmercifully by his mates. The incident deepened the general respect felt for the coach, and confirmed the conviction that it was useless to try to fool him, as he had “eyes in the back of his head.”

He certainly needed all his keenness, in order to accomplish the task he had set himself. The time was wearing away rapidly, and before long he would have to rejoin his own team for the championship season. There had been a good deal of rain, and practice in the field had been impossible for days at a time.

To be sure he had the “cage” for use in rainy weather. This was a large rectangular enclosure, perhaps twice as long as the distance from the pitcher’s box to home plate. The sides were made of rope that stopped the batted balls. There was ample room for battery work, and here, in bad weather, the pitchers and catchers toiled unceasingly, while the other players cultivated their batting eye, and kept their arms limber by tossing the ball about. But, at best, it was a makeshift, and did not compare for a moment with work in the open air on the actual diamond. And the days that now remained for that were distressingly few.

So he drove them on without mercy. No galley slaves worked harder than these college boys for their temporary master. He was bound that not an ounce of superfluous flesh should remain on their bones at the beginning of the season. Gradually his work began to tell. The soreness and lameness of the first days disappeared. Arnica and witch hazel were no longer at a premium. The waistbands went in and the chests stood out. Their eyes grew bright, their features bronzed, their muscles toughened, and before long they were like a string of greyhounds tugging at the leash.

He noted the change with satisfaction. Superb physical condition was the first essential of a winning team. His problem, however, was far from solved. It was only changed. He had made them athletes. Now he must make them ball players.

Individually they were that already, in the purely mechanical features of the game. They were quick fielders, speedy runners and heavy batters. But they might be all these, and yet not be a winning team. They needed team work, the deft fitting in of each part with every other, the quick thinking that, in a fraction of a second, might change defeat to victory.

His quick eye noticed, in the practice games, how far they came short of his ideal. Flynn, the other day, when he caught that fly far out in center, had hurled it into the plate when he had no earthly chance of getting the runner. If he had tried for Ames, who was legging it to third, it would have been an easy out. A moment later Ames counted on a single.

Then there was that bonehead play, when, with Hinsdale on third and Hodge on first, he had given the signal for Hodge to make a break for second, so as to draw a throw from the catcher and thus let Hinsdale get in from third. Hodge had done his part all right, but Hinsdale had been so slow in starting that the catcher was waiting for him with the ball, when he was still twenty feet from the plate.

He hated to think of that awful moment, when, with the bases full, White had deliberately tried to steal second, where Dick was already roosting. The crestfallen way in which White had come back to the bench, amid ironical cheers and boisterous laughter, was sufficient guarantee that that particular piece of foolishness would never be repeated. Luckily, it had only been in a practice game. Had it happened in a regular contest, a universal roar would have gone up from one end of the college world to the other, and poor White would never have heard the last of it.

The coach was still sore from this special exhibition of "solid ivory," when, after their bath and rubdown, he called the boys together.

"Now, fellows," he said, "I am going to talk to you as though you were human beings, and I want you to bring your feeble intelligence to bear, while I try to get inside your brain pans. They say that Providence watches over drunkards, fools and the Congress of the United States. I hope it also includes this bunch of alleged ball players. If ever any aggregation needed special oversight, this crowd of ping-pong players needs it. Now, you candidates for the old ladies' home, listen to me."

And listen they did, while he raked them fore and aft and rasped and scorched them, until, when he finally let them go, their faces were flaming. No one else in college could have talked to them that way and "gotten away with it." But his word was law, his rule absolute, and, behind his bitter tongue, they realized his passion for excellence, his fierce desire of winning. It was sharp medicine, but it acted like a tonic, and every man left the "dissecting room," as Tom called it, determined from that time on he would play with his brains as well as his muscles.

As the three chums went toward their rooms, they were overtaken by "Reddy," the trainer of the team. With the easy democracy of the ball field, he fell into step and joined in the conversation.

"Pretty hot stuff the old man gave you, just now," he said, with his eyes twinkling.

"Right you are," replied Bert, "but I guess we deserved it. I don't wonder that he was on edge. It certainly was some pretty raw baseball he saw played to-day."

"Sure," assented Reddy, frankly. "It almost went the limit. And yet," he went on consolingly, "it might have been worse. He only tried to steal one base with a man already on it. Suppose he'd tried to steal three."

The boys laughed. Reddy was a privileged character about the college. The shock of fiery hair, from which he had gained his nickname, covered a shrewd, if uneducated, mind. He had formerly been a big league star, but had fractured an ankle in sliding to second. The accident had only left a slight limp, but it had effectually destroyed his usefulness on the diamond. As a trainer and rubber, however, he was a wonder, and for many years he had been connected with the college in that capacity. It was up to him to keep the men in first-class condition, and he prided himself on his skill. No “charlie horse” could long withstand his ministrations, and for strains and sprains of every kind he was famous in the athletic world. His interest in and loyalty to the college was almost as great as that of the students themselves. He was in the full confidence of the coach, and was regarded by the latter as his right hand. If one was the captain of the college craft, the other was the first mate, and between them they made a strong combination. He was an encyclopedia of information on the national game. He knew the batting and fielding averages of all the stars for many years past, and his shrewd comments on men and things made him a most interesting companion. His knowledge of books might be limited, but his knowledge of the world was immense. He had taken quite a fancy to Bert and shared the conviction of the coach that he was going to be a tower of strength to the team. He never missed an opportunity of giving him pointers, and Bert had profited greatly by his advice and suggestion. Now, as they walked, he freed his mind along the same lines followed by the coach a little earlier.

“That was the right dope that Ainslee gave you, even if it was mixed with a little tabasco,” he said. “It’s the ‘inside stuff’ that counts. I’d rather have a team of quick thinkers than the heaviest sluggers in the league.

“Why,” he went on, warming to his subject, “look at the Phillies when Ed Delehanty, the greatest natural hitter that ever lived, was in his prime. Say, I saw that fellow once make four home runs in one game against Terry of the Brooklyn. I don’t suppose that a heavier batting bunch ever existed than the one they had in the league for three seasons, handrunning. Besides Ed himself, there was Flick and Lajoie, and a lot of others of the same kind, every one of them fence-breakers. You couldn’t blame any pitcher for having palpitation of the heart when he faced that gang. They were no slouches in the field, either. Now, you’d naturally think that nobody would have a chance against them. Every year the papers touted them to win the pennant, but every year, just the same, they came in third or fourth at the end of the season. Now, why was it they didn’t cop the flag? I’ll tell you why. It was because every man was playing for himself. He was looking out for his record. Every time a man came to the bat, he’d try to lose the ball over the back fence. They wouldn’t bunt, they wouldn’t sacrifice, they wouldn’t do anything that might hurt that precious record of theirs. It was every man for himself and no man for the team, and they didn’t have a manager at the head of them that was wise enough or strong enough to make them do as they were told.

“Now, on the other hand, look at the White Sox. Dandy fielders, but for batting – why, if they fell in the river they wouldn’t strike the water. All around the league circuit, they were dubbed the ‘Hitless Wonders.’ But they were quick as cats on their feet, and just as quick in knowing what to do at any stage of the game. What hits they did get counted double. They didn’t get men on the bases as often as the Phillies, but they got them home oftener, and that’s what counts when the score is added up. That sly old fox, Comiskey, didn’t miss a point. It was a bunt or a sacrifice or a long fly to the outfield or waiting for a base on balls or anything else he wanted. The men forgot about themselves and only thought of the team, and those same ‘Hitless Wonders’ won the pennant in a walk.

“Now, that’s just the difference between dumb and brainy playing and that’s what makes Ainslee so hot when he sees a bonehead stunt like that one this afternoon.”

“I suppose that you saw no end of that inside stuff pulled off while you were in the big league,” said Tom. “What do you think is the brightest bit of thinking you ever saw on the ball field?”

“Well,” said Reddy musingly, “that’s hard to tell. I’ve certainly seen some stunts on the diamond that would make your hair curl. Some of them went through, and others were good enough to go

through, even if they didn't. It often depends on the way the umpire looks at it. And very often it gets by, because the umpire doesn't look at it at all. Many's the time I've seen Mike Kelly of the old Chicagos – the receiving end of the ten-thousand-dollar battery – cut the corners at third when the umpire wasn't looking, and once I saw him come straight across the diamond from second to the plate without even making a bluff of going to third. Oh, he was a bird, was Mike.

"I shall never forget one day when the Chicagos were behind until they came to the plate for their ninth inning. They were a husky bunch of swatters and never more dangerous than when they were behind. Well, they made two runs in that inning, tying the score and then putting themselves one to the good. The Bostons came in for their last turn at the bat and by the time two men were out they had the bases full. One safe hit to the outfield was all they needed, and they sent a pinch-hitter to the bat to bring in the fellows that were dancing about on the bases.

"It was a dreary, misty afternoon, and, from the grandstand you could hardly see the fielders. Mike was playing right that day, and the man at the bat sent a screaming liner out in his direction. He saw at a glance that he couldn't possibly get his hands on it, but he turned around and ran with the ball, and, at the last moment, jumped into the air and apparently collared it. He waved his hands as a signal that he had it and made off to the clubhouse. The umpire called the batter out and the game was over. His own teammates hadn't tumbled to the trick, until Mike told them that he hadn't come anywhere near the ball, and that at that very moment it was somewhere out on the playing field. It came out later, and there was some talk of protesting the game, but nothing ever came of it. When it came to quick work, Mike was certainly 'all wool and a yard wide.'"

The boys did not express an opinion as to the moral quality of the trick, and Reddy went on:

"Perhaps the slickest thing I ever saw was one that Connie Mack put over on old Cap Anson of the Chicagos, and, believe me, anybody who could fool him was going some. His playing days are over now, and all you kids know of him is by reputation, but, take him by and large, a better player never pulled on a glove. Well, as I was saying, Anson was playing one day in Pittsburgh and Mack was catching against him. It had been a game of hammer and tongs right up to the last inning. The Chicagos, as the visiting team, came to the bat first in the ninth inning. The Pittsburghs were one ahead and all they needed to win was to hold the Chicagos scoreless. Two were out and two on bases when old 'Pop' Anson came to the bat. There wasn't a man in the league at that time that a pitcher wouldn't rather have seen facing him than the 'Big Swede.' However, there was no help for it, and the twirler put on extra steam and managed to get two strikes on him. The old man set himself for the third, with fierce determination to 'kill' the ball or die in the attempt. Mack walked up to the pitcher and told him to send in a ball next time, and then, the instant the ball was returned to him, to put over a strike. The pitcher did as directed, and sent over a wide one. Of course, Anson didn't offer to hit it, but Mack caught it.

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