

Scott Morgan

The New Boys at Oakdale



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CHAPTER I – AN ORDER DISOBEYED

Oakdale started the game by hammering Ollie Leach, the Wyndham pitcher, for three runs in the first inning. Indeed, it seemed that they would drive the schoolboy twirler from the slab in short order, and they might have done so only for a snappy, clean-cut double play which put an abrupt end to the fusillade of hits. When the Wyndham captain declined to make a change and sent Leach back to the mound in the second inning, the wondering Oakdalers told one another that they would finish the foolhardy southpaw then and there.

Leach, however, had steadied down a great deal, and the best the visitors could do was to squeeze in one more run, which they practically secured through a rank error by Peltz, the shortstop. At this point the successful batting of the visitors seemed to come to an abrupt end, for during the succeeding four innings Ben Stone was the only man who could hit the left-hander safely.

Meanwhile, Rodney Grant was doing some steady, clever pitching for Oakdale, which, with perfect support, would have

prevented the locals from gathering a single tally. Ned Osgood committed the first costly blunder. Covering third for Oakdale, he attempted to make a fancy play on a grounder, and let it get through him, enabling a Wyndham runner to score from second after two were out.

In the fifth, with two Wyndhamites gone, Charley Shultz, in the middle garden, tried to pull down a fly with one hand when he could have easily reached it with both hands, and his muff gave the locals another valuable mark in the scorer's book.

Jack Nelson, the Oakdale captain, reprimanded Shultz when, following a strike-out, the team trotted to the bench.

"You should have had that fly, Charley," said Nelson sharply; "and you would have got it if you'd went after it with both hands instead of one. That's the first time I've seen you drop a ball you could reach as easily as that one. Quit your grandstanding and play baseball."

Shultz shot Nelson a sullen look. "Oh, what's the use to holler?" he retorted. "I knew best whether I could reach it with both hands or one. I think I know how to play that field."

Nelson's teeth came together with a click, and for a moment, his cheeks burning hotly, it seemed that his annoyance and anger would master him, but he succeeded in holding himself in check.

"You can play the field all right, Shultz," he said, "and it's just because you can that I disapprove of that attempted fancy flourish. We've got to hold these chaps down somehow."

"Oh, don't worry," laughed Osgood optimistically. "We've got

them beaten now. We won the game in the first inning.”

“Mebbe we did, but we didn’t paound Lefty Leach off the slab,” reminded Sile Crane. “Gall hang that feller! I hit him once, but I’ll be switched if I can seem to do it ag’in. He’s sorter got me locoed!”

“He seems to have rattled everybody belonging to this whole bunch,” said Chipper Cooper. “We ain’t any of us doing ourselves proud – ’cepting old Stoney.”

Nor did they improve in the first of the sixth. Leach was working a sharp drop that had them all breaking their backs to the distasteful music of the Wyndham cheers. Grant was effective in the latter half, and the seventh opened with him at bat.

“Start us off, Rod,” implored Nelson, as the Texan secured his bat and left the bench. “Let’s sew this thing up with some more runs.”

The fellow from the Lone Star State made no reply, but he squared himself grimly in the batters’ box and took the measure of one of Lefty’s drops. The hit was, appropriately, a Texas leaguer, and the visiting spectators howled joyously as Rod capered to first.

Chipper Cooper, coaching on the line back of first, flapped his arms wildly and crowed like a rooster. As the cheering of the little knot of Oakdale Academy students died down somewhat, Chipper was heard whooping joyously:

“Here we go! The lucky seventh! Don’t try to steal second, Rod; that would be a base thing to do. We’re after old Lefty again,

and now we'll finish the job we started in the first round."

On the opposite side of the diamond Phil Springer, likewise enthused and excited, was wildly stuttering at the same time:

"Gug-gug-great work, Gug-Gug-Grant. Some cuc-cuc-class to that little bub-bingle. Take a gug-gug-good lead. Shultzie saw how you dud-dud-did it. He'll drive you round."

There was in this contest between rival high school nines little of that calculation and method employed by professionals and generally termed "inside baseball." Nevertheless, Jack Nelson knew the importance of team work and had done his best to drill his players in some of the rudiments. The deadly accuracy of the Wyndham catcher's throwing to bases was well known to the Oakdale lads, and, with no one down, an attempt to steal seemed inadvisable to Nelson. Shultz, the next batter, had been hitting the ball hard, even though he had found it impossible to place his hits safely, and instantly Nelson spoke a word to him and signalled to the watchful Texan at first that it was to be a hit-and-run.

On previous occasions, with the situation similar, the visitors had seemed to prefer sacrificing; and so, as Shultz confidently took his position at the plate, the infield drew closer, every fellow on his toes to go after a bunt or a short grounder.

Leach made sure his support was prepared for action, and then, wetting his fingers, he handed up a high whistler that had a bit of a jump on it.

Even though the ball was on a level with his cap visor, Shultz managed to hit it, boosting a high fly toward the smiling sky.

Grant was half way down to second when he heard a shrill, warning cry from both coaches.

“Look out! Get back! Skyscraper!” shrieked Cooper.

“Hey! Bub-bub-bub-bub –” Springer continued to “bub” even after the galloping Texan had plowed his spikes into the ground, brought himself to a halt and turned to race desperately back to the initial sack.

Little Peltz got under that high one and reached for it eagerly in his great desire to make the catch and turn it into a double play by a throw that should reach first ahead of the returning runner. For the moment, with the exception of the still shrieking coaches, every spectator seemed breathless and silent. Peltz got the ball, froze to it and made a beautiful throw, but Grant’s amazing promptness in stopping and getting back at high speed saved him by a yard or more, and he was declared safe at first.

“Pretty close, pretty close,” cried Baxter, the Wyndham captain.

“Missed by a mile,” contradicted Cooper, intensely relieved. “You can’t rope this wild Texas steer; he’s never been branded.”

“Cuc-cuc-come on, Osgood,” implored Springer, as the next hitter was seen to rise from the bench; “you’re the boy to do the trick.”

Already Nelson had given Ned Osgood his instructions.

“Bunt, Osgood,” were his swift words. “They may look for us to follow up with a hit-and-run. Sacrifice Grant along on the second ball pitched. Stone is the next batter.”

That he was right in his judgment concerning the locals was proven by the fact that the infielders resumed their regular positions, while the outfielders fell back a little. Persistent plugging at the hit-and-run game is frequently resorted to by teams having poor success through other methods, and the action of Baxter in signaling his players to fall back showed that he believed an attempt would be made to repeat the play that had been foiled through Shultz's high infield fly.

Leaning forward in a natural position, with his elbows on his knees and the fingers of his hands interlocked, Nelson thus telegraphed to Grant that the hitter would let the first ball pass and try to sacrifice on the next.

Jack's foresight seemed excellent, for, fancying the visitors would be eager to continue the hit-and-run attempt, Leach "wasted one" on Osgood, who did not even remove his bat from his shoulder.

"Let him do it again," piped Cooper. "Let him put himself in a hole, Osgood, then pick out a good one when he has to put it across."

Osgood, although he liked the game, was both obstinate and conceited, having a great deal of confidence in himself as a batter and believing that he knew as much about baseball as any fellow on the team.

Therefore, perceiving that the next ball was coming over slightly more than waist high and apparently just where he wanted it, he declined to bunt and swung with all his force,

hoping to make a long, sensational drive which would go safe and cover him with glory. Instead of doing this, he smashed a hot grounder straight into the hands of Foxhall, the second baseman.

Grant, fully expecting a sacrifice, was again racing down the line from first, and now he had no time to turn back. Without delay, yet with a deliberation that made for sureness, Foxhall turned and threw to first, completing an easy double play that was brought about directly through the batter's perverseness in declining to follow the instructions of his captain.

CHAPTER II – THE SCORE TIED

Jack Nelson sprang up from the bench, his face pale, his eyes flashing with anger. Osgood had stopped abruptly on his way to first, realizing that the double play sent Oakdale back to the field, and turned to cross the diamond to his position at third base. Nelson met him near the pitcher's position.

"What do you mean, Osgood," he demanded hoarsely – "what do you mean by disobeying my order? I told you to sacrifice."

"But it was a fine chance to hit the ball out and make some runs," returned the disobedient player defensively. "Sacrificing with one man down didn't look like good baseball to me."

"It makes no difference how it looked to you; your place was to follow my instructions. Stone has been hitting Leach hard and safely, and, with Grant on second, even a long single might have given us another score."

"I beg your pardon," said Osgood haughtily, "but I played baseball before I ever saw Oakdale, and I know something."

"That will do," interrupted the wrathful captain. "I don't care how much baseball you know, you'll have to obey me if you play on this team, and you may as well understand that at once. You can see that you threw away a chance for a run by hitting into that double play."

Ned Osgood was not the sort of fellow to relish this style of talk even from the captain of his nine, and for a moment he was

tempted to make a sarcastic rejoinder. Something prevented him from doing this, however, and he walked onward toward third, shrugging his shoulders. His manner was so irritating to Nelson that for the moment, even though Osgood had shown himself to be the best available man for the position he filled, Jack was tempted to bench him instantly. This temptation was put aside, but it was followed by an immediate decision to stand no more foolishness from Osgood.

The alarm that had been awakened in the bosoms of the Wyndhamites by Grant's safe drive was dissipated in joy over the defensive work of the home team, which had prevented the Texan from advancing further. Boys and girls of Wyndham High cheered in concert and waved their banners, while the crowd of older sympathizers made a great uproar.

Like Nelson, Grant had been extremely annoyed by Osgood's pigheaded action, and the Oakdale pitcher was somewhat disturbed as he resumed his position on the firing line.

"Hard luck, Rod," said Stone, the somewhat taciturn catcher, as he buckled on the body protector.

"It wasn't luck," denied Grant; "it was mulish foolishness, nothing less."

Laughing and well satisfied, the Wyndham lads capered to their bench, where Leach, seeking for his bat, listened and nodded as Captain Baxter gave him a word of instruction.

"Don't try to kill that wild and woolly Texan's speed, Lefty," said Baxter. "He's burning 'em over like bullets, and we're

swinging our heads off. Just try to meet 'em, that's all."

Grant's annoyance was made still further apparent when he opened with a weirdly wild heave over Stone's head that would have counted against him as a wild pitch had there been a runner on the sacks.

"Going up," shouted some one from the Wyndham bleachers; and, in an effort to rattle the pitcher, the crowd redoubled the racket it was making.

Seeing that the pitcher was unsteady, Stone began to fuss over his mask strap, which had suddenly become unsatisfactory and needed adjustment. The entire Oakdale team felt the tension of the moment, and Stone's subterfuge met their approval. On the other hand, it led their opponents to protest against the delay and urge the umpire to make them play.

Apparently getting the mask strap fixed at last, Ben resumed his position behind the pan and squatted to signal between his knees. Rod shook his head, and the catcher changed the signal. Then Grant nodded and pitched.

Faithful to instructions, Leach took a short grip on his bat and brought it round quickly to meet the ball. There was a ring of wood against leather, and an instant later Nelson, flinging himself to one side, reached for the grounder. It struck his gloved hand and carromed off to the left. He went after it instantly, scooped it up and shot it to Crane at first, but it arrived a bare second too late.

The Wyndham crowd cheered as madly as if Leach had

reached the initial sack on a clean hit instead of an error. Out in center field, Shultz laughed with the satisfaction of a player who, lacking whole-souled interest in his team, feels that his own bad work has been minimized by that of a teammate. In this case his satisfaction was made the greater by the fact that the minimizing error had been contributed by the chap who had criticized him a short time before.

Nelson stood still for an instant, then held up his hand for the ball, which Crane threw to him. Turning, the captain made a signal, which caused Cooper to take his position on second. Tossing the sphere to Chipper, Jack walked into the diamond and spoke in a low tone to Grant.

“Don’t let that rattle you, old man,” he said. “I reckon we’re both hot under the collar, and we’d better cool off a bit. Take your time with these chaps; they can’t hit you.”

“I’d like to punch Osgood’s head!” growled the Texan.

“So would I, but that wouldn’t help us win the game. Look out for a sacrifice now. They’ve found they can’t steal on Stone.”

“Play ball! play ball!” howled the crowd.

“Play ball,” said the umpire sharply.

On first, Leach was seeking to add to the opposing twirler’s unsteadiness by uproarious laughter and the repeated declaration: “We’ve got him going! We’ve got him going!”

Nelson was most deliberate about returning to his post, and not until he was there did he nod for Cooper to give Grant the ball. Like a flash Rodney shot it to first, and the laughter of

Leach was cut short by a gasp as he barely ducked under Crane's reaching hand.

"Almost gug-got him then!" shouted Springer from right field.

"Here's the head of the list," called a coacher, as Crispin squared himself in the batters' box. "Keep up the good work."

In order to make it difficult for Crispin to bunt, Grant put one over high and close – too high and too close. Crispin caught himself in his swing and then pretended that he had been hit on the shoulder; but the pretense was so palpably a fake that the umpire behind the pitcher, who chanced to be an Oakdale man, refused to let him take first. Naturally, the other umpire, who was in charge of the bases, said nothing, but somehow his manner seemed to denote that he disagreed on the decision. This led to a kick by the Wyndham captain, who dropped it quickly, however, when reminded by a fellow player that the delay was giving Oakdale a chance to steady down.

Again Grant attempted to put the ball over high and close, but he simply got it across the inside corner slightly below the batter's shoulders, and Crispin made a successful bunt that rolled along just inside the first base line. Jumping over the ball, the hitter sprinted hard for first.

Grant scooped up the rolling sphere and heard Nelson's sharp cry to put it to first. It whistled past Crispin's ear and spanked into Crane's mitt.

"Out at first," said the Wyndham umpire, with something like a touch of regret.

“Good work, Crispin,” gleefully called Baxter, giving the player a slap on the shoulder. “That was a beauty bunt, old boy. Now we’ve got ’em where we want ’em.”

Even as he spoke he signaled from his position on the coaching line for Foxhall to hit the ball out; and Foxhall was liable to do it if anybody could.

Grant worked carefully with this batter, meanwhile holding Crispin as close to first as possible. Nevertheless, Foxhall swung uselessly only once. The second time he whipped his bat round he connected with the horsehide and sent the sphere skimming along the ground straight at Cooper.

Eager and anxious, Chipper booted it beautifully. Like a cat he chased it up and made a futile effort to get the hitter. The throw was a case of bad judgment as well as a wild heave, which even long-geared Sile Crane could not reach.

So while Crane was chasing after the ball, Foxhall, who should have been out, romped on to second, and Leach scored amid a tremendous tumult.

Grinning broadly, Sam Cohen, Wyndham’s heavy-hitting left-fielder, danced out to the plate, determined to keep things moving. Surely, it looked like Wyndham’s opportunity, and, besides the desire to prevent the visitors from settling down, there was a legitimate excuse for the continued uproar of the home crowd. Although they well knew that Grant was little to blame for the turn of affairs, the Wyndham coaches were trying hard to “get him going” by pretending that it was his fault, and

behind Rodney's back Foxhall capered on second, clapping his hands and making gestures intended to encourage the shrieking spectators.

Never in his life had Chipper Cooper been more chagrined and ashamed. His face beet-red, he begged Nelson to kick him.

"Get back to your position and play ball, Cooper," said the captain, as calmly as he could. "We've got to stop this foolishness right here. They mustn't make another run."

Grant's teeth were set and his under jaw looked grim and hard. He knew well enough that Cohen was especially dangerous at this stage of the game, for the nervy Hebrew was one of those rare batters who hit better in a pinch than at any other time, the necessity seeming always to prime him properly.

Trying Cohen out with a bender that went wide in hopes that in his eagerness he would be led to reach for it, Rodney delivered a ball. The next one was high and likewise wide, for Stone had seen Foxhall taking a dangerous lead off second and called for a pitch that would put him in easy position to throw. Nelson, awake to precisely what was transpiring between the battery men, made a leap for the sack before the ball reached Stone's hands, and Ben lined it down with a wonderful short-arm throw, which saved time and yet was full of powder.

Only for the warning shouts of the wide-awake coaches, who had seemed to divine the move in advance, Foxhall might have been caught napping. As it was, he barely succeeded in sliding back to the sack, feet first, and the Wyndham umpire instantly

spread his hands out, palm downward. Foxhall drew a breath of relief.

A moment later Baxter shouted:

“Got him in a hole, Cohen! Make him put ’em over now! Make him find the pan!”

Steady as a rock, Grant did put the next one over, and Cohen, “playing the game,” let it pass for a called strike.

“He can’t do it again!” cried Baxter. “Make ’em be good!”

Grant used a drop, starting the ball high so that it shot down past the batsman’s shoulders and across his chest. Even as the umpire called, “Strike two,” the Oakdale players shouted a warning to Stone. It was needless, for Ben had seen Foxhall speeding along the line in a desperate and seemingly ill-advised attempt to purloin third. Craftily Cohen fell back a step to one side, as if to give the catcher room to throw, but with the real purpose of bothering him as much as possible without bringing, by interference, a penalty upon the runner. Possibly this was the reason why Stone threw high, forcing Osgood to reach to the full length of his arms in order to get the sphere. Almost invariably the Oakdale catcher put the ball straight and low into the hands of the baseman, so that the latter could tag a sliding runner quickly and easily; and had he been able to do this now, Foxhall doubtless could not have slid safely under Osgood, which, however, was precisely what he did succeed in doing.

“Who said we couldn’t steal on old Stoney?” shouted Peltz from the coaching line back of third. “Great work, Foxy, old

man. You put that one across on him.”

With only one local player gone and but a single run needed to tie the score, the tension of the moment was intense. No one realized the danger better than Grant, and when he pitched again he made another clever effort to “pull” Cohen; an effort that almost succeeded, for Sam caught himself just in time to prevent his bat from swinging across the plate.

“Ball three,” came from the umpire.

“He’s going to walk you, Cohen; he’s afraid of you,” came from Baxter.

It must be admitted that Grant had considered the advisability of handing Cohen a pass, but knowing Wolcott, the fellow who came next, was almost as dangerous a hitter, he had decided that such a piece of strategy would be ill advised. Taking into consideration the batter’s ability to meet speed, Rod shook his head when Stone called for a straight one on the inside corner. Ben knew at once that the Texan wished to try to strike Cohen out, and so he swiftly changed the signal.

Now Cohen had brains in his head and was also a good guesser. Moreover, he knew that Grant relied largely upon his remarkable drop when a strike-out was needed. And so it happened that, seeing Rod decline to follow the first signal, he was convinced that the pitcher would hand up one of those sharp dips.

Having guessed right, the batter judged the drop beautifully and hit it a tremendous smash. Away sailed the ball toward center

field, some distance to the right of Shultz, who stretched his stout legs to get under it.

“He can’t touch it!” was the cry.

Nevertheless, when Foxhall started off third, Peltz, defiant of coaching rules, sprang forward, grabbed him and yanked him back.

“Get on to that sack!” the little shortstop panted. “Get ready to run! You can score anyhow; you don’t need a start.”

Thus advised, Foxhall leaped back to the cushion, upon which he planted his left foot with the right advanced, crouching, his hands clenched, his arms hooked the least bit, ready to get away like a sprinter starting from his mark.

Shultz made a splendid run, leaping into the air at the proper moment and thrusting out his bare right hand. The ball struck in that outshot hand and stuck there.

An instant before the catch was made Peltz shrieked, “Go,” and Foxhall raced for the plate.

It was impossible to stop that run. Cohen’s long sacrifice fly had tied the score, in spite of the strenuous and sensational one-handed catch in center field; and the crowd leaped and yelled, with arms up-flung and caps hurled into the air.

CHAPTER III – BENCHED

In moments like this the baseball fan of any age goes wild with frenzy; especially is this true of the enthusiastic schoolboy fan who has watched his team fight an uphill game and come neck-and-neck with a worthy and much-feared rival in one of the late innings of the contest. The youthful Wyndhamites shrieked until their faces were purple and their eyes bulging, flourishing their banners and frantically pounding one another over heads and shoulders. At the bench the players laughingly danced around Foxhall and then cheered Cohen as the latter came walking back from first, muttering to himself that the catch had been “a case of horseshoes, nothing less.”

In the midst of this excitement Nelson ran up to Grant, whose face was pale, but grim and set as ever.

“You couldn’t help it, Rod,” said the Oakdale captain soothingly. “They won’t get any more. The bases are clean now.”

“But they’ve tied the score,” growled the Texan. “That’s the first time Cohen has touched one of my drops to-day.”

“Hold them where they are, and we’ll win it yet,” declared Jack optimistically. “We didn’t expect a walk-over with this bunch.”

Wolcott’s courage was high as he faced Rodney. Heedless of the uproar, the Texan burned the air with his speed, and Wolcott fouled.

“Strike one,” called the umpire.

Another smoker followed with a slightly different twist, and this time the batter missed cleanly.

“That’s two of them, old Maverick,” called Stone, breathing on his smarting right hand. “Some speed, old man – some speed there.”

Seemingly with precisely the same movement and snap, Rodney made the third pitch; but this time the ball lingered astonishingly on its way, as if held back by some subtle force, and, as a result, the befooled batter struck too soon, not even fouling it. This gave the little bunch of loyal Oakdalers a chance to cheer.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to call me down for that one-handed catch, are you?” said Shultz insolently, as he came jogging to the bench.

Nelson shot him a look and turned away without answering. Not satisfied, the fielder turned to Cooper. “A man can usually tell whether he can reach the ball best with one hand or two,” he declared loudly enough for the captain to hear. “I didn’t make that muff intentionally.”

Ben Stone walked out to the plate and watched Lefty Leach waste two benders, which led Springer stammeringly to prophesy that Leach, being afraid, would give the stocky catcher a pass. The next one, however, was over the outside corner and precisely where Ben wanted it, whereupon he smashed a terrific drive over second and took two sacks on it amid further enthusiasm by Oakdale.

Nelson could not refrain from calling Osgood's attention to the fact that this hit would have given the visitors a score had his instructions regarding sacrificing been obeyed.

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Ned in his blandly polite and tantalizing manner; "but it's no dead sure thing that Stone would have made just that kind of a hit in the other inning. Anyway, we ought to get some runs now."

Sile Crane ambled awkwardly forth to the plate and hit into the diamond the first ball pitched, giving Stone, who had a good start, plenty of time to reach third, for Foxhall juggled the grounder a moment. Realizing he could not stop Ben, Foxhall snapped the sphere to first in time to get the lanky batter.

"The squeeze, Cooper," hissed Nelson in Chipper's ear, as the little shortstop rose from the bench. At the same time Jack assumed a pose that told Stone what was to be tried.

Ready to play his part, Ben crept off third, intending to dash for the plate and rely upon Cooper to hit the ball into the diamond somewhere.

Leach placed himself in position, nodded in response to his catcher's signal, hunched his left shoulder a bit, and, whirling like a flash, threw to third. Stone had started forward with that shoulder movement by the pitcher, and was caught off the sack. Instantly, even as he sought to get back without being touched, he called for judgment on a balk.

The umpires had changed positions, and now the Wyndham man was behind the pitcher. In response to that demand for a

decision on Leach's movement he grimly shook his head.

"It was a balk – a plain, cold balk," cried Nelson, on his feet.

"No balk," denied the umpire, still shaking his head.

"In that case," said the other umpire slowly, "Stone is out at third."

Nelson ran into the diamond and confronted the Wyndham man. "It was as rank a balk as I ever saw," he asserted hotly. "What kind of a deal are you trying to give us?"

"I saw no balk, and I was looking at the pitcher," returned the umpire. "Get back to your bench."

Nelson argued in vain, while the crowd made the air ring with hoots and cat-calls. Presently the umpire threatened to pull his watch and forfeit the game, whereupon the disgusted and angry Oakdale captain walked slowly back to the bench.

"You shouldn't let him get away with it," said Osgood. "It was a balk all right."

"Why didn't our man call Stone safe?" rasped Grant.

"Ben was caught off the sack by five feet," said Nelson. "Two wrongs don't make a right. But it's hard medicine to swallow."

Thus far Chipper Cooper had not made a hit; but now, as if he, too, was fired with resentment by the injustice of the decision, he landed on the second ball pitched to him and drove it out for a clean single.

"G-g-good bub-bub-boy, Chipper!" shouted Springer. "It's a wonder he didn't call it a fuf-foul, though."

Sleuth Piper, solemn and savage, took his place at the plate,

grabbing his bat and shaking it as if he meant to make a dent in the ball as surely as Leach got it within reach. Not once did he swing, however, and the left-handed twirler looked disgusted when he had presently handed up the fourth ball in succession and thus given one of the weak batters of the visiting nine a pass.

“Get the next man, Lefty,” urged Baxter. “He’s fruit for you.”

With the head of the list following Springer, the Oakdale boys hoped for the best; but Phil put up a dead easy infield fly that was smothered, and the visitors had lost another splendid opportunity.

Never in his life had Grant pitched better than he did in the last of the eighth. Only three batters faced him, and two of these fanned, the third putting up a foul which Stone took care of with ease.

“Steady, fellows,” cautioned Baxter, as his men started for the field. “We’ve only got to hold them. Old Grant can’t keep that steam up. We’ll get to him.”

Leach started the ninth as if he meant to duplicate the last turn of the Texan, fanning Captain Nelson with apparent ease.

Once more Rod Grant came to bat, and once more, with his pet club in his hands, he out-guessed the southpaw twirler, banging a clean single into center.

At Osgood’s elbow Nelson quickly said:

“Sacrifice him to second. That will give him a possible chance to score if Shultz hits safe.”

Osgood made no retort. He saw Grant looking toward the

bench and placing himself in position to get away swiftly on the bunt. At the plate, he beheld the first ball pitched to him apparently coming over just where he wanted it, and instantly he felt that he could hit it out safely. Furthermore, he had not changed in his conviction that it was bad policy to sacrifice with one man down, even though the next two hitters were supposed to be the best stickers on the team, and one of them, Shultz, was his especial chum. Therefore he swung on the ball and met it. Instead of a drive, it proved to be a grounder that went clipping over the skin diamond straight into the hands of Peltz. Like a flash Peltz snapped it to Foxhall, who had leaped on to second, and, turning, Foxhall lined the sphere to first, again completing a fast double play.

Nelson was on his pins, and he intercepted Osgood as the latter, without looking toward him, attempted to pass on the way to his position at third.

“Go to the bench,” said Jack, his voice hoarse and husky. “You’re out of the game, Osgood.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Osgood. “What did you say, sir?”

“I said you’re out of the game. I won’t stand for such rank disobedience.”

“Oh, very well,” said Osgood, coolly turning toward the bench. “You’re the autocrat – at present.”

“What’s the matter?” demanded Shultz, running up. “What’s the trouble, Ned?”

“Nothing,” was the reply, “only I’m benched because I didn’t

make a safe hit.”

“If he benches you I’ll quit myself,” threatened Shultz.

“You won’t quit,” said Nelson instantly. “You’re fired. The bench for you, too. Get off the field.”

“Well, wouldn’t that choke you!” gulped Shultz, astonished to have his bluff called so promptly. “How will he fill both our places?”

Nelson showed them in a moment by placing Roy Hooker, one of the spare pitchers, at third, and sending Chub Tuttle to fill center field.

Osgood and Shultz retired to the bench, where they sat talking, the latter showing by his manner that he was thoroughly enraged against his captain, while his friend, more politic and suave, accepted the situation with pretended indifference and disdain.

Although the team had been weakened by the removal of these two players, for the substitutes surely could not fill their positions with an equal amount of skill, Grant betrayed no sign of weakening himself. Peltz and Leach were retired by the strike-out route, and even Crispin’s best performance was a weak grounder on which he perished in a hopeless dash to first.

The tenth inning opened with Tuttle at bat. Chub had never been a hitter, but he did succeed in rolling a weak one to Leach, who threw him out.

“Now, Stoney,” implored Cooper, as the catcher again came up, “you’ve got to do it. He’s been a mark for you. One run is all that we need to take this game. Lace it out.”

Leach was very glad that the bases were empty. Even under those circumstances he began as if he meant to pass this dangerous slugger. After pitching two balls, however, he got one across, and Ben fouled it. Then came another ball, which was followed by a high, speedy shoot.

Stone smashed the horsehide again, bringing every spectator up standing. It was a splendid drive, but Cohen took it on the run and held fast to it.

“Ah-ha! Oh-ho!” whooped Baxter joyously. “Old Eat-’em-alive is finished. Now you have things your own way, Lefty.”

Although Shultz was grinning as Stone came walking back, Osgood politely declined to smile.

Sile Crane sighed as he picked up his bat.

“By Jinks!” he muttered. “I’d sartainly like to make one more hit off that feller. I don’t seem able to touch him no more.” After which he walked to the plate and swung at the first ball pitched with all the strength of his long, sinewy arms.

There was a tremendous ringing crack, and the ball went sailing away, away, far over the center-fielder’s head. The little Oakdale crowd screamed like lunatics, but the Wyndhamites were distressingly silent as the long-gearred lad raced over first, second, third, and on to the plate, which he reached ere the ball could be returned to the diamond.

CHAPTER IV – WYNDHAM'S LAST DESPERATE STAND

Charley Shultz sneered openly, with his full red upper lip curved high and exposing his broad teeth, as the delighted Oakdale players congratulated their comrade who had made that opportune home-run drive.

“Look a’ that gangling country jay,” he muttered in Osgood’s ear. “See him grin like a baboon. See him distend his flat chest. Probably he thinks himself a Lajoie or a Wagner.”

“Hush, Charley!” cautioned Osgood gently. “Don’t be too open in your feelings; it’s bad policy. Besides, I’ve got Crane on the string. He’s astride the fence now, and doesn’t know which way he’s going to fall.”

“Oh, all right,” returned Shultz; “but I don’t see what use you can have for him. He hasn’t any money, and his influence doesn’t amount to much.”

“Even the support of the weakest chap may prove of some value when the break comes.”

“After to-day you ought to force things in a hurry. I hope you’re not going to stand for the rotten deal that swell-head Nelson has handed out to us.”

“Have patience, old man – have patience,” soothed Osgood. “I’ll strike when the iron is hot. When possible, a good general

always avoids going into an engagement before his plans are properly prepared and his forces strengthened to the full limit.”

The fact that these two disgruntled fellows took no part in the rejoicing of their team seemed to be overlooked at the time; for this was a game in which a run in the tenth inning was of tremendous importance, and, taking into consideration the recent course of the contest, almost an assurance of victory. A triumph over the always formidable Wyndhamites in the season's first meeting between the two teams would give Oakdale a much desired advantage in the High School League.

“Oh, why can't I do something like that?” cried Cooper. “It makes my solitary little tap look like ten below zero, and I always get cold feet in that sort of weather.”

Nevertheless, he faced Lefty Leach like a chap exuding confidence from every pore. Leach was frowning and savage in his bearing, but Chipper returned the Wyndham pitcher's dark look with a cheerful smile, threatening to start the stitches in the horsehide if Lefty dared to put one over.

The thunderstruck and dismayed Wyndham crowd awoke from its benumbed condition and resumed cheering, although there was plainly a disheartened note in the volume of sound, something which the players themselves must have recognized. On the other hand, the Oakdale spectators were once more jubilant with restored confidence in their team and the conviction that Crane's wonderful wallop had practically decided the result.

Despite Cooper's aggressive attitude of assurance, Leach

unhesitatingly slanted the ball across and continued to do so while the Oakdale shortstop rapped out foul after foul.

“You’ll get him in a minute,” encouraged Baxter. “He never was any good with the war-club.”

Much to Cooper’s sorrow, this prophecy came true, for Chipper finally hoisted a short one back of first for Turner, the baseman, to gather in.

“Only three more men, Grant,” said Nelson. “Get them, and we hang up a scalp.”

“I’ll sure do it if it’s in me,” whispered the Texan to himself, as he made his way to the diamond.

Baxter rushed to the bench to have a few words with his players.

“Don’t be too eager, fellows,” he cautioned; “and still, don’t let him sneak any good ones across. He’s pitching for his life now, but he’ll try to pull you all. If you can start us going, Foxy, we’ll crawl out of this hole right here.”

Making no retort, Foxhall stepped into the batters’ box and watched the Oakdale pitcher make the situation more difficult for himself by failing to find the pan with the first two pitches. An in-shoot followed, and, remembering Baxter’s words, Foxhall picked it off the inside corner with a sharp swing that sent it grass-cutting ten feet inside of third.

Roy Hooker, who was filling Osgood’s position, was not an infielder, and, although he leaped in front of the ball, he failed to keep his feet together, which allowed the humming sphere to

go through him cleanly.

“Ha! Look a’ that!” cried Shultz, giving Osgood a nudge. “That would never have happened if you’d been there.”

“Don’t make comparisons – don’t,” said Osgood quickly. “They are odious. He’s going to stretch it into a double.”

Sent onward by the coacher, Foxhall raced over the initial sack and stretched himself for second. It chanced, however, that Sleuth Piper was in position to back Hooker up, and, rushing forward, he took the ball on a favorable bound and threw it to second while still in his stride. It was one of the cleanest pieces of fielding, and perhaps the best throw, Piper had ever made in his baseball career, for it came straight into the hands of Nelson, who disregarded the dangerous spikes of the sliding runner and tagged Foxhall so cleanly and effectively that the locals had not the slightest excuse for a kick on the decision of “out.”

“Well, wouldn’t that cramp you!” muttered Shultz disgustedly. “Why in thunder did the man try to make a double of it?”

“Once more,” said Osgood, “I must caution you not to show your feelings so plainly. Even if we’re benched, we’re still members of the team and – ”

“I don’t know whether *I* am or not,” rasped the resentful Shultz. “I don’t propose to play on any team where I’m handed a raw deal by a thing like Jack Nelson.”

“Now look here,” said his companion, “you’ll stick on the team unless you’re fired off it, for as members of the nine we’ll have more pull with the bunch than otherwise. You’re too brash,

Charley. You haven't any policy or subtleness. Don't think for a minute that I'm not just as sore as you, but as injured yet still loyal Oakdalers we can win more sympathy than by open rebellion."

"I s'pose you're right," admitted Shultz; "but I never could control myself the way you can."

That the Wyndham boys realized how desperate the situation was became manifest through an undisguised quarrel which now arose between Foxhall and two of his teammates who attempted to criticize him.

"What's the matter with you?" snapped the bitterly disappointed chap. "Pelt sent me down. Chew the rag with him if you're going to jump on any one. How'd I know that fielder was in position to back up and get the ball to second so soon?"

"Cut that out, all of you," interposed Baxter. "Stop fussing and play ball. This game isn't over yet."

"But it's pretty well over," cried Cooper gleefully. "It's all over but the shouting."

Cohen, who seemed never troubled by a weak heart, predicted that he would get a hit and begged Wolcott to advance him with a duplicate. Then the nervy young Hebrew stood forth and demonstrated that he had a good eye by refusing to bite at the coaxers and compelling Grant to put the pill across. When this was done, he hit it hard and fair, the resounding crack bringing a shout from the Wyndham crowd.

That shout was abruptly cut short when Cooper shot into the air and pulled Cohen's drive down with one hand. From the

opposite side of the field burst the sudden relieved shrieks of the Oakdalers, whose hearts had been choking them an instant before.

“Keep quiet, Charley,” said Osgood, placing a hand on his friend’s knee. “It looks like it’s really all over. Take your cue from me and pretend you’re happy.”

“You’re asking just a bit too much, Ned,” said Shultz huskily. “You know I’m a poor bluffer in any kind of a game.”

“But you’re usually lucky, just the same; I’ve seen you hold some great cards.”

“Some catch, Chipper – some catch,” Grant was saying happily. “You raked the clouds for that one.”

“I had to do something to make up for my last raw play,” returned the beaming little chap.

Nelson was laughing. “We’re backing you up now, Rodney, old boy. That kind of support ought to give you courage to take a fall out of Wolcott.”

To tell the truth, although he made a pretense of being undismayed and confident, there was really little hope left in Wolcott’s heart. Nevertheless, it was always Wyndham’s way to play a game out without let-up, and the batter showed that he was trying for a hit by fouling the ball several times. Presently, however, the Texan deceived him with one of his most effective drops, and Wolcott’s fruitless slice at the air brought the game to an end with the score 4 to 3 in Oakdale’s favor.

CHAPTER V – THE DIPLOMACY OF OSGOOD

Shultz sullenly watched his teammates giving the losers a complimentary cheer; he could not take his cue from Osgood and join with the slightest pretense of rejoicing in this cheering. And when the happy players gathered up their trappings and started for the adjacent academy, where in the basement gymnasium the Wyndhamites had given them a room in which to change their clothes, Shultz trailed along behind, listening with persistent bitterness to the chattering fellows who were still rejoicing over the result.

“Oh, Craney!” cried Cooper, as he playfully banged Sile with an open hand. “That measly little tap of yours in the last round was certainly a soporific wallop.”

“Here, yeou better let Sleuth slaughter the language that fashion,” grinned Crane. “Soporific! What’s it mean, anyhaow?”

“Why, soothing, sleep-producing; it’s what a prize-fighter hands his antagonist when he gives him a two-ton jolt on the point of the jaw. It put Wyndham down and out, all right.”

“Oh, that didn’t end the game by a long shot. If old Texas hadn’t pitched some in the last half – ”

“Great centipedes!” interrupted Grant. “If you fellows hadn’t given me Big League support they’d corralled the game after all.

The way you raked down Cohen's drive was sure some playing. And that little turn by Piper plugged their promising start right handsomely."

"I was frightened when Hooker let Foxhall's grounder get through him," declared Ned Osgood; "but Sleuth was right on the job. It was a splendid victory."

Jack Nelson shot the speaker a quizzical glance, but said nothing.

In the gymnasium they continued to discuss the game while peeling off their soiled uniforms and getting into the heavy clothes which would be so necessary to their comfort on the long homeward drive; and, unable to keep still, Shultz cut in with an occasional sarcastic remark. For a time no one seemed to notice him, but suddenly Grant, unable to hold himself longer in restraint, turned on the disgruntled fellow.

"Quit your beefing," he exclaimed. "Why don't you try to follow Osgood's trail and make a pretense of being decent, whether you feel that way or not?"

The blood which suffused Shultz's face turned it almost purple, and he glared at the Texan as if he longed to seize the fellow by the throat and smash his head against the wall.

"I've got a right to open my mouth," he snarled, "and I propose to say what I please, regardless of any common, cow-punching _"

They would have been at it in a twinkling had not Nelson promptly leaped between them.

“Stop, Grant! Hold up!” he cried, seizing the pitcher, whose face was beginning to take on that awesome and terrible look which indicated that his fiery temper was mastering him. “Don’t start a scrap. It will be bad – bad business.”

“I certainly won’t allow anybody to shoot off his mouth at me that fashion,” said Rodney, his voice vibrant with the passion he could scarcely restrain. “He’s been sneering and hollering like the sorehead he is, and it’s sure getting too much for me.”

“It’s my affair, if it’s anybody’s,” asserted the captain. “I’m the one’s he’s sore on.”

“And only for a lucky piece of work by Piper, you’d lost the game by putting Hooker in Osgood’s place,” said Shultz. “Just because he disagreed with you about sacrificing when he got the kind of a ball he knew he ought to hit out, you show your authority by benching him. Sacrificing in such a game, with one man down and a good hitter at bat, would be laughed at by – ”

“That will do for you,” Nelson cut him short. “No man on the team can talk to me this way, much less a new player like you. If you and Osgood came to Oakdale with the idea that you’re going to run the nine or ruin it, you may as well get that out of your noddles right away.”

By this time Osgood had his friend by the arm.

“Cool down, Charley,” he advised in his most pacifying manner. “You’re giving a wrong impression by letting yourself get excited. I’m sure we were both just as eager to help win that game as any one. In fact, I will assert that it was my eagerness

which led me to try for a hit when Leach put the ball over just where I like 'em best. It's true it seemed to me we'd be weakening ourselves by a sacrifice with one man down, but still, I meant to follow instructions when I went to the plate. It was only when I saw that ball coming across the pan so nicely that I forgot everything and tried to land on it for a safe drive. Even though in that moment I was led to forget instructions, I must insist that my heart was right. I've played the game ever since I was old enough to toss a ten-cent ball, and I learned something of its fine points at Hadden Hall. I'm not blaming Captain Nelson if his ideas and mine are not fully in accord, for baseball down here in this country can scarcely be as advanced as it is --"

At this point Nelson suddenly threw back his head and laughed, although perhaps it was not a laugh of simple amusement.

"That has been your pose ever since you came to Oakdale," he said. "Your pity for us poor, ignorant countrymen is wholly appreciated, Osgood. It may be that we're very shortsighted in failing to perceive the splendid opportunity we have for learning something about real baseball from you and Shultz, but it seems that you might find a more delicate and less egotistical method of opening our sleepy eyes."

For a single breathless moment it seemed that Osgood was on the verge of permitting this sarcasm to lead him into a touch of temper, at least; but he was crafty and far too clever not to realize that such a thing would be likely to put him at a disadvantage in

the eyes of some members of the team whom he had reasons to think were inclined to sympathize with him.

"I didn't come to Oakdale to teach baseball or anything else," he asserted. "I think I've stated before this that Oakdale Academy was a school of my mother's choice, not mine, and mothers who are fearful of the temptations which their sons may encounter in large and really efficient schools sometimes have peculiar ideas."

"Fathers, too," put in Shultz, with a curl of his red lips. "My old man was determined that I should get my preparatory education far from the evil influences of the really wide-awake world, and so he buried me in a forsaken graveyard."

"Too bad about yeou poor fellers," Sile Crane could not refrain from observing.

"I enjoy baseball," Osgood hastily went on. "I love the game. I was glad when it seemed assured that I'd have a chance to play on the academy nine. However, I scarcely fancied it would be considered a fault or a detriment that I happened to know something about the game as it's played to-day not only in big schools and colleges, but in big leagues. I've never missed an opportunity of seeing a Big League game and trying to wise up on the methods of the players. I'd like to see Oakdale win out this season, and my interest in our success is so great that if I thought for a moment I would produce discord and disaffection on the team I'd voluntarily withdraw."

This assertion was made with an air of earnestness and sincerity, but the fellow had spoken craftily, with the design of

spiking Nelson's guns, being certain that the captain suspected him of the very purpose which he so ardently disclaimed. Shultz, who knew his friend's secret motives better than any one else, really found it difficult to suppress a grin, while inwardly he was telling himself that Osgood certainly was a "slick duck." Why, Nelson was not only flanked, but his line of defense was cut off completely!

In a vague way the captain seemed to feel something of this, but still his quick perception told him that to a large extent Osgood had created a favorable impression, which would only be increased were his motives doubted.

"Well, that's all right," said Jack, a bit bluffly. "That's all we can ask of any chap. You've both shown that you can play baseball, and if you show a willingness to respect the wishes of your captain that should be sufficient. We want players loyal to the team and to the school."

Right here Shultz made another break. "The school!" he laughed. "We'll be loyal to the team all right if we're given a show, but you must know that the school is almost a joke. It's taught by a dead one, with a lot of decayed back numbers as directors. Right here at Wyndham they have got a professor who's alive and who takes interest in some things besides books. Old Prof. Richardson has outlived his usefulness as a teacher. He's let the times pass on and leave him about thirty years behind. Who ever saw him at a baseball game, or any similar sport? The Wyndham prof was out here to-day watching the go, and he seemed as interested as

any one. When Professor Richardson gets through with the day's session he toddles home to dressing-gown, slippers and tea. How a school with such a head can stand as well in athletics as Oakdale does certainly gets me."

"It's true," admitted Nelson, "that Professor Richardson has never taken any real genuine interest in outdoor sports, but he's a good principal and does his work well in the class room. His health isn't always the best. Everyone who knows him well respects him, at least, and I'm sorry to hear you say what you have, Shultz."

"I've simply stated a fact. Some day Oakdale will wake up to it, too, and the old man will lose his job. Some day before long you'll see a younger, more up-to-date principal filling his shoes. It will be a mighty good thing if that time comes soon."

"Let's not discuss that," interposed Osgood. "Whether Professor Richardson is efficient or not has nothing to do with the matter that threatened to produce a disturbance and some hard feelings on the team. That business is all settled now, and I think we understand that we're a nine united and anxious to do our best to win the championship. Come, fellows, let's forget it all. I'm going to."

This magnanimity had its effect, and, as they completed dressing for the jaunt home, the boys were again chattering and jesting, as if no threatening cloud had risen.

CHAPTER VI – THE SUSPICIONS OF SLEUTH

Osgood's manner during the tedious homeward jaunt would not have led any one unaware of what had taken place to fancy that there had been the slightest unpleasantness. He was polite and affable to every one upon the buckboard, and when the boys sang, as they did once or twice, his fine baritone voice was sufficient to command admiration and applause.

This fellow had entered Oakdale Academy in the midst of the term of the previous autumn, and had maintained for a time a certain reserve which prevented his schoolmates from seeking to pry into his personal affairs. It was some time, indeed, before the naturally curious boys learned from him that he was a native of New York, but that, on account of his mother's health, his parents had removed to California some years before, where his father had suddenly passed away from an attack of heart disease. Of this bereavement he continued to be disinclined to say much, and it was noticeable that while he seemed distinctly proud of his mother, his father was never mentioned in that manner.

Nevertheless, Edwin Osgood took pains to impress upon his associates that there was genuine blue blood in his veins, and his claim was that he was upon his mother's side a direct descendant of Lord Robert Percival, Earl of Harcourt. Little by little at

various times he let drop a few words which, pieced together, told of the banishing of a younger son of Lord Percival, who had brought upon his head the displeasure of the old Earl through his wild and wayward ways. This younger son had come to America, where he married, and Ned asserted that he was of the third generation in this country.

All this was apparently dragged reluctantly from his lips, and he even made some pretense of disdain for ancestry, although his stationery bore a crest, and those chaps who were favored by invitations to his rooms stated that they had seen various portraits of Osgood's noble forebears.

Unlike other students at Oakdale who came from out of town, Ned did not simply room or board; he lived in the home of a widow by the name of Mrs. Chester, who had been induced to take him in through what was said to be a surprisingly liberal money consideration. In Mrs. Chester's house he had a sitting-room and a bedroom with an adjacent bath, and it was said that the widow, perhaps a bit impressed by having such a young swell in her home, permitted him to do about as he pleased in his rooms.

Now a fellow like this might through snobbery easily make himself unpopular in a country school, but Osgood's seeming whole-souled, manly boyishness, combined with an unusual knack at all-round sports and baseball in particular, had overcome the prejudice of many chaps who were inclined at the outset to regard him with disfavor. His staunchest friend,

however, was Charley Shultz, with whom he had taken up almost immediately, and who seemed so remarkably different from him in every way that wonderment over their chumminess was justified. Shultz was rough and brusque and not infrequently positively boorish; furthermore, he was something of a bully, although, finding this bent disapproved by Osgood, he plainly sought to hold the inclination in check.

Among the village girls Ned was greatly admired, but with the boys a strong point in his favor was the fact that, although always pleasant and polite, he rarely attempted to play the gallant. He seemed to prefer fellows of his own age and with similar tastes in sports to the prettiest girl of the village or the school, and, although some of the misses were miffed over this, he rarely wasted time in their company.

Another point in his favor was the fact that, although he was known to have a pocket full of spending money and sometimes spent it generously on his companions, he managed to avoid patronism, and did not make the fellow less supplied with coin feel small or mean on that account. In short, he was generally sized up as "a jolly good fellow," and, although they had not ventured to say as much, several members of the nine had thought that Nelson was rather too hasty and harsh in sending Osgood to the bench for his disregard of orders. Besides Jack Nelson, Rodney Grant and Ben Stone were almost the only ones who had not fallen powerfully beneath the spell of Osgood's personality.

During the most of the homeward trip Shultz sat silent on a seat which also held Tuttle and Piper. Once or twice he had a few words to say, and he endeavored in saying them to give the impression that he, like Ned, had dismissed the incident of the game which had so nearly led to a personal encounter in the Wyndham gymnasium. But Shultz was no diplomat; subterfuge to him was a most difficult thing.

The result of the game had been telephoned to Oakdale, and the boys were welcomed with cheers as the buckboard rolled up the main street toward Hyde's livery stable. At the stable they piled out with their bats and bags, shivering a little from the raw cold of the spring evening, which had crept into their bones in spite of overcoats.

At the door of the stable Osgood paused a moment, and, Springer, Hooker and Cooper joining him, he was heard to say:

"See you later, fellows. Don't forget. So long. I'm hungry as a bear, and I won't do a thing to Mrs. Chester's grub to-night." Carrying the bag that contained his uniform and mitt, he swung off with a vigorous, buoyant stride, whistling cheerfully.

A few low words passed between the trio left behind, after which they dispersed in starting for their various homes.

Jack Nelson was not the only one to perceive something mysterious in the action of these fellows; Sleuth Piper's eyes and ears were wide open. When Shultz had likewise departed Nelson spoke to Grant.

"I don't suppose it's any of my business, but I'd really like to

know what's in the wind. Those fellows are up to something."

"I reckon so," nodded Rodney; "but I opine it's no concern of mine."

Both were startled as Piper noiselessly appeared beside them.

"There are things going on in this town," said Sleuth, his voice discreetly lowered, "of which the general public is wholly unaware."

"Hello!" laughed Rodney, lifting his eyebrows. "The great detective is on the job. I judge you have inside information, Pipe?"

"Very little," answered Sleuth; "but if I set out to get it I'll not be balked. Once I take up a case worthy of my attention, I am relentless as Fate."

"Do you have an idea this matter is a case worthy of your attention?" asked Nelson, winking slyly at Grant.

"That I can't answer," confessed Sleuth; "but it's my theory that persons whose movements are secretive and mysterious deserve to be watched. Possibly I can tell you one little fact of which you are unaware."

"Let flicker," invited Jack. "We're listening, all agog."

"For some little time," said Sleuth, in answer to this invitation, "certain fellows have been meeting regularly every Saturday night in the rooms of Ned Osgood."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Grant, disappointed. "Why, I suppose, as Osgood happens to be such a popular chap, they merely drop in on him for a social call."

"Is there any reason why a fellow who is merely making a social call should shroud his movements in secrecy?" questioned Sleuth instantly. "If you were going to drop round to see Osgood for a little pleasant chat of a Saturday evening would you take pains to prevent the fact from becoming known? Or would you, if meeting a friend on your way, openly and frankly tell him where you were going?"

"I don't opine I'd be covering up my tracks any whatever."

"Not unless it was to be something more than a mere social call," nodded Sleuth decisively. "By apparent chance it has happened that I have met on different occasions two or three of these fellows who were on their way to call upon Osgood, and when I asked them where they were going they either lied or begged the question. Ha! Now you perceive that there must be some hidden motive for this secrecy. A man who takes extreme pains to conceal his motives should be watched."

"There's certain some logic in that," admitted the Texan; "but I'll allow I don't see what those fellows could be up to that would concern anybody but themselves."

Nelson, however, was thoughtful, frowning the least bit.

"It may not concern any one else," he said presently, "and, then again, it may. It may be my fault, but I can't quite trust Osgood. I'll admit that he acted pretty decent in practically acknowledging that he was wrong to-day; but all the time I couldn't help feeling that he was playing policy, while thoroughly satisfied that he had been in the right and that I was a chump to call for the sacrifice.

As a matter between us three, there's a feeling of dissension on the team as well as in the school, and I'm sure that Osgood and Shultz are behind it. When I benched Osgood it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if some of the players besides Shultz had made an objection. He has got a grip on them, and they think he knows more baseball than I or any of the old players. I've seen them imitating his methods and his style of play. When a ball team loses confidence in the judgment of its captain, that team soon gets into a bad way."

"I didn't like the talk Shultz made about Prof. Richardson," said Grant. "The old boy may not take a natural modern interest in athletics, but you sure hit the nail on the head, Nelson, when you said that he does his work well in the class room and therefore makes a good principal. But I suppose I'd likely object to almost anything coming from Shultz. There's something about that fellow that certain rubs my fur the wrong way."

"He's irritating," agreed Jack; "but I can't help thinking that Osgood is the more dangerous man. If there's trouble, you'll find that he will really be the leader."

"Oh, I don't judge there will really be any trouble," said Rodney optimistically. "If there was any brewing, I think you nipped it in the bud, captain. I've got to hike home, or Aunt Priscilla will begin to worry; she always does if I'm late to meals. Good night."

Sleuth pulled at Nelson's sleeve. "Wait a minute," he requested in a low tone. "I've a powerful suspicion that you're right in

thinking there's trouble brewing – there's something going on beneath the surface. I'm going to investigate. I'm going to take this matter up professionally. I'll pierce the dark depths of the plot. I'll lay it bare in all its heinous nakedness.”

“Go as far as you like, Sleuth,” smiled Nelson. “As far as I'm concerned you have free rein, but don't drag me into it in any way.”

CHAPTER VII – YOUNG SPORTS

After shivering for more than half an hour beneath a tree across the street from Mrs. Chester's home, Sleuth Piper finally decided to make a move. Since seeking the hiding shelter of that tree he had seen four boys ascend the widow's steps, ring the bell and obtain admission. It was now some time since the last one had disappeared within the house, and Piper believed no more were to follow.

There was a light in Osgood's room on the second floor, but the shades were closely drawn at the windows. Sleuth would have given much had he been able to look through those windows, but being prevented from doing so, he had decided on a bold move.

Swiftly crossing the road, he softly mounted the steps and hastily gave a single ring at the bell. After a few moments the summons was answered by a maid, and the boy boldly entered the moment the door swung open.

"I'm to see Osgood," he said in a low tone. "I'm a little late. I presume the other fellows are ahead of me?"

"Mr. Osgood has several friends with him in his room," said the girl. "He's expecting you, isn't he?"

"Why, sure," returned Piper, although even in his "professional capacity" his conscience was troubled by the falsehood, which surely was something quite surprising in a detective.

By the muffled hall light the boy deliberately mounted the carpeted stairs. He heard the maid retire, and the sound of the door closing behind her was most gratifying to his ears.

There was little trouble in finding the door of Osgood's room, for from behind it came the subdued murmur of voices; and, listening, Piper heard at intervals a queer, soft, irregular clicking sound. But when he would have taken a peep through the keyhole, he was much disappointed to find it either plugged or covered on the inside by something that baffled him.

"And that proves there's something queer going on," he whispered to himself. "They're not talking loud, either; they're keeping their voices down. A lot of fellows who get together and chat free and easy don't bother to talk that way. Wish I could hear something more."

After a time, growing desperate through the intensity of his increasing curiosity, he placed his hand gently on the knob of the door with his ear close to the panel, and, when the talk seemed to be a bit more general inside, he softly and slowly turned the knob.

The door was locked!

"That settles it," he mentally exclaimed. "There's something off color taking place here."

Still with the utmost caution, he permitted the spring slowly to force the catch back into place and removed his hand from the knob.

"There's just one thing to do now," he decided; "I've got to put on a bold front. It's the only play for me to make."

Lifting his hand, he knocked softly upon the door.

Immediately the hum of voices ceased, and after a little Sleuth fancied he heard some one whisper within the room.

He knocked again.

There was the sound of a person stirring, and the key turned in the lock. The door was opened the tiniest crack, and the voice of Osgood asked:

“Who is it? What’s wanted?”

“Hello, Ned,” called Sleuth, as he again grasped the knob and gave the door a push which flung it wide open. “Thought I’d come round for a little call this – Why, you’ve got company! Excuse me.”

The scene beheld by Piper’s eyes caused them to grow unusually big and round. Within the room four boys remained seated around a table covered by a green cloth and lighted by a shaded suspension lamp. On that table were red, white and blue poker chips and some cards. In each fellow’s hand were also the cards which he had held when play had been interrupted by Sleuth’s knock. The young gamers looked somewhat startled, an expression which gave way to annoyance as they recognized the unwelcome caller.

“How the dickens did you get into the house?” exclaimed Osgood, in a manner that was, for him, unusually rude.

“Why,” returned Sleuth instantly, “I just said I came round to make you a little call. But if I’m not welcome – ”

“Old Pipe always has his nose into everything,” laughed

Chipper Cooper, one of the quartet at the table. “As long as he’s here to call, bring him in and let him do his calling in the game.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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