



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars (Full Book)

Lester Chadwick

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Chapter 1: A Hot Game

“Come on, Sam, get a move on. I thought you’d be out on the diamond long ago. What’s the matter?”

“Oh, I had to help dad put in some fence posts. I’m through now, Darrell, and I’ll be right with you.”

“Setting fence posts; eh?” and Darrell Blackney, the young manager of the Silver Star baseball nine of Riverside looked critically at Sam Morton, the team’s pitcher. “Well, Sam, I hope it didn’t make you stiff so that you can’t put some good balls over the plate. It’s going to be a hot game all right.”

“Oh, forget it!” cried Sam, as he finished buttoning his jacket while he joined his chum. “We’ll beat ’em to a frazzle all right. I’m going to pitch my head off to-day.”

“You may—if you don’t go to pieces the way you once did.”

“Say, what you talking about?” demanded Sam, with some warmth. “I can pitch all right, and don’t you forget it.” He seemed unnecessarily aroused.

“Oh, I know you can pitch,” spoke Darrell easily, “only I don’t want you to be too sure about it. You know the Resolutes of Rocky Ford have a strong team this season, and their pitcher is——”

“Oh, I know what Hen Littell is as well as you,” broke in Sam. “He thinks he’s a whole lot, but you wait. I’ve got a new drop ball, and——”

“Well, then, you’d ought to have been out on the diamond this morning, practicing with Bart Ferguson. He’s got a new catching glove, and if you and he can connect on the curves we may do some good work. But I wish you’d had some practice this morning.”

“So do I, but dad made me help him, and I couldn’t very well get off. I tried to sneak away, but he got on to my game and put a stop to it.”

“Oh, well, of course if you had to help your father that’s different,” spoke Darrell, who was a manly young chap, somewhat in contrast to Sam, who was not as upright as he might have been. Sam had a boastful and confident air that caused many to dislike him, but as he was the best pitcher the Silver Stars had had in some seasons his short-comings were overlooked.

And certainly Sam had been pitching pretty good ball thus far. True, at times, he

“went up in the air,” but all pitchers are likely to do this on occasions. Sam had great belief in his own ability.

There was considerable baseball feeling in the little town of Riverside, located on the Appelby River, in one of our New England States. Though the nine was an amateur one, and composed of lads ranging from fourteen to nineteen years of age, yet many fast games had been seen on the village diamond, which was kept in good shape by volunteers. A small admission sum was charged to view the contests and from this the boys were able to buy their uniforms, balls, bats, and other things. With some of the money the grounds were renovated from time to time, and the fences, bleachers and grandstand kept in order.

There was a sort of informal county league existing among several nines in the towns surrounding Riverside, and perhaps the bitterest rivals of the Silver Stars were the Resolutes of Rocky Ford, a place about five miles farther up the stream than Riverside. To-day one of the games in the series was to take place, and the occasion, being Saturday, was a gala one in the home town of the Silver Stars, on whose grounds the contest was to take place.

“Well, you’ll have a little time for practice before the game begins,” remarked Darrell as he and Sam walked toward the diamond. “We’ve got about an hour yet.”

“Are the Resolutes here?”

“They hadn’t come when I passed the grounds a little while ago on my way to see you. I couldn’t imagine what kept you.”

“Well, it was all dad’s fault. Hang it all——”

“Never mind,” broke in Darrell quickly. “Dads are all right as a rule.” He had lost his own father not long since, and his heart was still sore. He could not bear to have any one speak disrespectfully of parents. “I guess we’ll make out all right,” he added.

“Oh, sure we will!” exclaimed Sam, full of confidence. “They won’t have a look in.”

“Well, hurry up and get in some practice with Bart,” advised the manager.

“Who’s going to cover first to-day?” inquired Sam, as they hurried along the streets, which were already beginning to fill with the crowds making their way to the game.

“I think I am for most of the time,” answered Darrell. “George Rankin and I talked it over and decided that would be a good way to lead off. Later, if I find I’m needed on the coaching line, I’ll let Tom Davis take my place.”

"Tom isn't much good."

"Oh, I think he is."

"Didn't he miss two hot throws to first base in the game last Saturday?"

"That was because you put them over his head. You want to be careful, Sam, when there are two on the bags, how you throw to first. Lots of times I have to jump for your throws, and if I wasn't pretty quick at it they'd get by me."

"Oh, well, you won't have any complaint to-day. I'll get 'em there all right. But you'd better stay in the whole game yourself."

"I'll see. Hark, what's that?"

The inspiring notes of a coaching horn echoed down the village street.

"Sounds like a tally-ho," remarked Sam.

Just then there swung into view a large stage, drawn by four horses, the vehicle filled with a cheering, shouting and laughing crowd of boys.

"That's the Resolute team," said Darrell. "They're coming in style all right."

Again there came the thrilling notes of the bugle, blown by some one in the stage. Then followed another large vehicle, filled with a throng of cheering lads.

"They've brought a crowd along," commented Sam.

"Yes, maybe they're depending on rooters to help them win the game."

"Well, our fellows can root some too," spoke the pitcher. "I'm glad there's going to be a big crowd. I can pitch better then."

"Well, do your best," urged the manager. "There's Percy Parnell and Fred Newton over there. I thought they were out on the field long ago."

"Maybe they had to set fence posts too."

"Maybe," assented Darrell with a laugh. "And here comes Tom Davis. Who's that with him?" and the pitcher and manager glanced at a tall, well-formed lad who was walking beside the substitute first baseman. "Evidently a stranger in town," went on Darrell.

"Yes, I've seen him before," remarked Sam. "He lives down on our street. The family just moved in. His name is Batson, or Hatson, or something like that. His father works in the harvester factory."

"Hum," mused Darrell. "He looks like a decent sort of chap," and he gazed critically at the stranger. "Maybe he'd like to join our club," for the ball team was a sort of adjunct to a boys' athletic organization.

"Oh, we've got enough fellows in now," said Sam quickly.

"Always room for one more," commented the manager, who was ever on the lookout for good material for the nine. Perhaps Sam suspected something like this, for he glanced quickly at his companion.

"Say, if you think I'm not good enough——" began the pitcher, who was noted for his quick temper.

"Now, now, drop that kind of talk," said Darrell soothingly. "You know we're all satisfied with your pitching. Don't get on your ear."

"Well, I won't then," and Sam smiled frankly.

By this time Percy Parnell, the second baseman, and Fred Newton, the plucky little shortstop, had joined the pitcher and the manager, and greetings were exchanged.

"Are we going to wallop 'em?" asked Fred.

"Sure thing," assented Sam.

"It's going to be a hot game all right," was Percy's opinion.

"All the better," commented Darrell. "Say the people are turning out in great shape, though. I'm glad to see it. We need a little money in our treasury."

They turned in at the players' gate. The Resolute team had preceded them, and already several of the members of that nine were in their uniforms and out on the diamond. They were lads of the same age as their rivals, and had about the same sort of an organization—strictly amateur, but with desires to do as nearly as possible as the college and professional teams did.

But there was a great difference, of course, and mainly in the rather free-and-easy manner in which the rules were interpreted. While it is true that in the fundamentals they played baseball according to the general regulations, there were many points on which they were at variance, and a professional probably would have found much at which to laugh and be in despair. But what did it matter as long as the boys, and those who watched them, enjoyed it? Not a bit, in my opinion.

As the Silver Star lads proceeded to the improvised dressing rooms under the grandstand, several more of the Resolute players hurried out, buttoning jackets as they ran.

"Oh, we'll get you fellows to-day all right!" shouted Henry (otherwise known as Hen) Littell, pitcher and captain of the Resolutes.

"All right, the game's yours—if you can take it," called back Darrell, with a laugh.

The diamond soon presented an animated scene, with many players and a few substitutes pitching, catching or batting balls about. The crowds were beginning to arrive and occupy seats in the small grandstand or on the bleachers. Many preferred to stand along the first and third base lines, or seat themselves on the grass.

Approaching the grounds about this time were the two lads of whom Sam and Darrell had spoken briefly. One was Tom Davis, the substitute first baseman and the other boy whom Sam had referred to as “Batson” or “Hatson.” Sam had it nearly right. The lad was Joe Matson, and as he is to figure largely in this story I will take just a moment to introduce him to you.

Joe was the son of Mr. and Mrs. John Matson, and had lately moved to Riverside with his parents and his sister Clara, who was a year his junior. The family had come from the town of Bentville, about a hundred miles away. Mr. Matson had been employed in a machine works there, and had invented several useful appliances.

Located in Riverside was the Royal Harvester Works, a large concern. In some manner Mr. Isaac Benjamin, the manager, had heard of the appliances Mr. Matson had perfected, and, being in need of a capable machinist, he had made Mr. Matson an offer to come to Riverside. It had been accepted, and the family had moved in shortly before this story opens.

Joe was a tall, well-built lad, with dark hair and brown eyes, and a way of walking and swinging his arms that showed he had some athletic training. He had made the acquaintance of Tom Davis, who lived in the house back of him, and Tom had asked Joe to go to the game that day.

“For it’s going to be a good one,” said Tom proudly, since he was a member of the nine, even though only a substitute.

“Who’s going to win?” asked Joe, as they approached the grounds.

“We will, if——” and then Tom stopped suddenly, for there was a yell from inside the fence and a moment later a ball came sailing over it, straight toward the two lads.

“Look out!” yelled Tom. “That’s a hot one! Duck, Joe, duck!”

But Joe did not dodge. Instead, he spread his legs well apart and stood ready to catch the swiftly-moving horsehide in his bare hands.

Chapter 2: Tying The Score

Ping! The ball came in between Joe's palms with a vicious thud, but there it stuck, and a moment later the newcomer had tossed it back over the fence with certain and strong aim.

"I guess some one will pick it up," he said.

"Sure," assented Tom. "Say, that was a good stop all right. Have you played ball before?"

"Oh, just a little," was the modest and rather quiet answer. In fact Joe Matson was rather a quiet youth, too quiet, his mother sometimes said, but his father used to smile and remark:

"Oh, let Joe alone. He'll make out all right, and some of these days he may surprise us."

"Well, that was a pippy stop all right," was Tom's admiring, if slangy, compliment. "Let's go in, I may get a chance to play."

Joe turned toward the main entrance gate, and thrust one hand into his pocket.

"Where you going?" demanded Tom.

"Into the grounds of course. I want to get a ticket."

"Not much!" exclaimed his companion. "You don't have to pay. Come with me. I invited you to this game, and I'm a member of the team, though I don't often get a chance to play. Members are allowed to bring in one guest free. I'll take you in. We'll use the players' gate."

"Thanks," said Joe briefly, as he followed his new friend.

"Here's a good place to see it from—almost as good as the grandstand," said Tom, as they moved to a spot along the first base line. "Though you can go up and sit down if you like. I'm going to put on my things. I may get a chance at first."

"No, I'll stay here," said Joe. "Then I can see you make some good stops."

"I can if Sam doesn't put 'em away over my head," was the reply.

"Oh, yes, that's so. You started to say that you thought our side—you see I'm already a Silver Star rooter—that our side would win, if something didn't happen."

"Oh, yes, and then that ball came over the fence. Well, we'll win, I think, if Sam doesn't go to pieces."

"Who's Sam?"

"Sam Morton, our pitcher. He's pretty good too, when he doesn't get rattled."

"Then we'll hope that he doesn't to-day," said Joe with a smile. "But go ahead and dress."

"All right," assented Tom, and he started off on a run to the dressing rooms. It was only just in time, too, for at that moment Darrell came hastening up to him.

"Why haven't you got your suit on?" the manager asked. "You'll probably play some innings anyhow, and I don't want any delay."

"All right—right away," Tom assured him. "I'm on the job."

"Who do you think will win?" asked a youth sitting next to Joe on the grass.

"Oh, I don't know," began Joe slowly. "I haven't seen either team play."

"Oh, then you're a stranger here?"

"Yes, just moved in."

"I saw you with Tom Davis. You must be that Matson lad he told me lived back of him."

"I am, and I hope Tom's side wins."

"That's the stuff! So do I. But those Resolutes have a good nine."

"Aw, go on!" broke in a lad back of Joe. "They haven't any good batters at all."

"What's the matter with Hank Armstrong?" demanded some one.

"Well, he's pretty good, but Ford Lantry or Seth Potter on our team can bat all around him."

"How about their pitcher?" asked Joe.

"Well, he's pretty good," admitted the lad who had first addressed Joe.

"But he can't come up to Sam Morton when Sam is at his best," said some one else, joining in the conversation.

"Yes—when he's at his best," repeated another lad. "Those Resolutes have it in for us, but we're going to wipe up the ground with them to-day all right."

"Like fun!" exploded a Resolute sympathizer. "I'll bet you——"

"Play ball!" broke in the voice of the umpire, and the clanging of the gong warned the players and others to clear the field.

"We're last at the bat," said Tom, "and that means a whole lot."

"Yes," assented Joe, and then the Silver Star pitcher took his place in the box

and exchanged a few preliminary balls with the catcher, Bart Ferguson.

"Play ball!" yelled the young umpire again, selecting some pebbles with which to keep score.

Hank Armstrong, the sturdy left fielder of the Resolutes, was the first at the bat for his side, and with a vicious swing he hit the first ball which Sam pitched to him. Squarely on the bat he caught it with a resounding ping!

Away it sailed straight over Sam's head and over the head of the second baseman. Farther and farther it went, until the centre fielder began running back to get it.

"Oh, wow! Pretty one! Pretty one!"

"Go on! Go on!"

"Make a three bagger of it!"

"Run, you beggar!"

These and many other cries speeded Armstrong on. He was running fast and reached second well in advance of the ball. But he dared not go on to third.

"Hum, if they hit Sam like that too often he won't last very long," commented Tom.

"Oh, that was a fluke," declared Rodney Burke, who sat behind Joe.

There was a surprised and disconcerted look on Sam's face as he gazed at the next batter. No sooner had the ball left Sam's hand, that Armstrong was away for third like a shot, for he was a notorious base stealer. Bart threw to third, but the ball went too high and the baseman jumped for it in vain. Armstrong came in with the first run.

"Begins to look bad!" yelled Tom in Joe's ear, for the cheers and exultant yells of the Resolute crowd made ordinary talking impossible.

But that was all the visiting team got that inning, for Sam struck out two men, and the third fouled to Bart.

"Now we'll see what our fellows can do," commented Tom.

Seth Potter, the left fielder, was first up, and he had two strikes and three balls called on him in short order. Then he got under a pretty one and made first.

"Watch out now, and run down when he throws!" cried Darrell, who was coaching.

Seth did run, but was caught at second. Jed McGraw, the centre fielder, was next up and knocked a safety, getting to first.

Then came Ford Lantry, who played right field, and he knocked a pretty three-bagger which brought in McGraw and the run. At that the Silver Star crowd went wild with joy, but it was all they had to crow over as the next two men struck out and Lantry died on third.

The next two innings were marked by goose eggs for both sides, and in the fourth inning the Silver Stars brought in two runs, while their opponents could not seem to connect with the ball.

"Old Sam is doing fine!" cried Tom.

"Yes, he seems to have good control," commented Joe.

"But he lacks speed," said Rodney Burke.

"Oh, cheese it! Do you want to give all our secrets away to these fellows?" asked Tom in a low voice, indicating the many Resolute sympathizers who were all about.

"Well, it's true," murmured Rodney, and Joe felt a sudden wild hope come into his heart.

The game went on enthusiastically, if not correctly from a professional or college baseball standpoint. Many errors were made and several rules were unconsciously violated. The young umpire's decisions might have been questioned several times, and on numerous occasions the game was stopped while the respective captains, and some of the players, argued among themselves, or with the umpire. But the disputes were finally settled, though there was a growing spirit of dissatisfaction on both sides.

"Play ball!" yelled the umpire, at the conclusion of an argument in the fifth inning.

It was then that the Resolutes did some heavy stick work, and tallied three runs to the enthusiastic delight of the team and its supporters.

"We've got to do better than this," murmured Darrell to Captain Rankin and Sam when they took the field at the end of that inning, and a big circle stared at them from the score board as the result of their efforts.

"I'm doing all I can!" snapped Sam. "I'm not getting decent support."

"Aw, cut it out! Of course you are!" asserted Rankin.

A single tally by each side in the sixth, and two for the Silver Stars and one for the Resolutes in the seventh, brought the game to that usual breathing spot. The score was now a tie, and the excitement was growing.

"For cats' sake beat 'em out, fellows!" pleaded Darrell. "Use your bats. They're

to hit the ball with, not to fan the air!"

Perhaps his frantic appeal had some effect, for in the next inning the Resolutes only got one run, while, when the Silver Stars came to bat to close the inning, they hammered out three, putting them well ahead.

But there was trouble brewing. Sam's arm was giving out. He realized it himself but he dared not speak of it. Grimly he fought against it, but he saw that the other side was aware of it.

"Come on now, we'll get his goat!" yelled the captain of the Resolutes. Then began what may be regarded as the cruel practice of yelling discouraging remarks at the man in the box. Sam was plainly told that he was "rotten" while other and less mild epithets were hurled at him.

These had their effect. He gave two men their base on balls, and he made a number of wild throws to first where Tom Davis had replaced Darrell Blackney. However, by a strong brace Sam managed to hold his opponents runless, though in this saving work he was nobly assisted by his fellows, and by the quickness of Tom in not letting the wild balls get by him. Tom was a magnificent high jumper, which served him in good stead.

The ending of the eighth saw the score nine to seven in favor of the Silver Stars, they having brought in three runs.

It began to look, in spite of Sam's trouble, as if the home team would win. There was a riot of cheers when the Resolutes went to bat in the ninth inning, and despite the fact that they were two runs behind, their supporters did not fail them.

"Win! Win! Win!" they yelled.

"Oh, we'll win all right," said Captain Littell grimly.

And he and his men gave good evidence of doing so a few minutes later. Sam literally "went to pieces." He lost all control of the ball, and was fairly "knocked out of the box." There was a look of despair on the faces of his mates.

"What's the matter with him?" demanded Joe, who was surprised at the sudden slump.

"Oh, that's what he does every once in a while," said a disgusted Silver Star supporter. "You can't depend on him. Wow, that's rotten!" for Sam had delivered a ball that was batted over the right-field fence.

Instantly there was a wild scene. Two men were on second and third base respectively when this "homer" was knocked and they came racing in. The home-run batter followed.

"Ring around the rosey!" yelled the Resolute captain. "If we had more on base they'd all come in. Hit at anything, fellows! Hit everything."

It looked as if they were doing it, for they made six runs that inning, which brought the score to thirteen to nine in favor of the visitors.

"Five runs to win, and four to tie," murmured Darrell as his men came in from the field for their inning. "Can we do it?"

How it was done even he scarcely knew, for so fierce was the rivalry between the teams, and so high the excitement, that several times open clashes were narrowly averted. But the four runs were secured, and though the Silver Stars played their best they could not get another one. But even to tie the score after Sam's slump was something worth while.

"Ten innings! It gives us another chance for our white alley," murmured Tom to Joe, as the first baseman made ready to go on the sack again. "If we can get one run, and hold them down to a goose egg it will do."

But the Resolutes seemed to have struck a winning streak. Sam could not pull himself together, and got worse. Darrell was in despair, and there was gloom in the hearts of the Riverside residents.

"Haven't they another pitcher they can put in?" asked Joe of one of his neighbors.

"No, and if they had Sam would raise such a row that it might bust up the team. He'll play it out."

In the tenth inning the Resolutes pounded out three more runs, batting Sam all over the field, and when the Silver Stars came up the score was sixteen to thirteen against them.

"Oh, for a bunch of runs!" pleaded Darrell, as his men went to bat.

But they couldn't get them. The Resolute pitcher with a grin on his freckled face sent in curve after curve and struck out two men in short order. Then Tom Davis knocked a little pop fly which was easily caught, and the game ended in a riot of yells, as a goose egg went up in the tenth frame for the Silver Stars. They had lost by a score of sixteen to thirteen, and there were bitter feelings in their hearts against their rivals.

"Why don't you get a pitcher who can pitch?" demanded one of the Resolutes.

"Don't you insult me!" cried Sam striding forward. "I can pitch as good as your man."

"Aw, listen to him! He's dreaming!" some one yelled, laughingly.

"I am; eh? Well, I'll show you!" cried Sam angrily, and the next instant, in spite of the effort of Darrell to hold him back, he had leaped for the lad who had mocked him, and had struck him a heavy blow.

Chapter 3: Mrs. Matson Is Worried

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the lad whom Sam had struck.

"That's what I mean by it. I mean you can't insult me!"

"I can't, eh? Well, I can whip you all right," and with those words Sam was nearly knocked off his feet by a return blow.

"Here, cut that out!" yelled Darrell.

"Aw, what's eating you?" demanded another of the Resolute crowd. "If you fellows are looking for a fight you can have it; eh boys?"

"Sure thing!" came in a chorus, as the players crowded up, with bats in their hands.

"This may be serious," murmured Darrell to Tom. "See if you can't stop Sam from fighting."

But it was too late, as Sam and his opponent were at each other hammer and tongs.

"Do you want to fight?" sneered the lad who had accosted the manager.

"No, I don't."

"Afraid?"

"No, of course not."

"Then come on," and the lad, half in fun perhaps, gave Darrell a shove.

Now Darrell, though disliking fistic encounters, was no coward and he promptly retaliated with a blow that knocked his enemy down.

"Wow! It's a fight all right!" yelled another lad, and then Darrell and his antagonist were at it.

The crowd from the stands and bleachers now began thronging about the enraged players. There had always been more or less bad blood between the two rival nines and now, when the Resolutes had taken a game that was almost won away from the Silver Stars, the feeling broke out anew.

On all sides there were impromptu battles going on. Some of the lads were good-

natured about it, and only indulged in wrestling contests, but others were striking viciously at each other and soon there were some bloody noses and blackened eyes in evidence.

"I'll show you whether I can pitch or not!" yelled Sam, as he aimed a hard blow at the lad with whom he had first had an encounter. He missed his aim, and went whirling to one side, to be met by a blow as he turned about, and almost sent down.

"Do you want anything?" suddenly demanded a lad stopping in front of Joe, who was standing near Tom. Joe recognized his questioner as the Resolute shortstop.

"No, he's a stranger here—he isn't on the nine," said Tom quickly.

"Well, can't he fight?" was the sneering demand.

"Yes, if I want to, but I don't want to," and Joe answered for himself.

"I'll make you want to," was the retort, and Joe was struck in the chest. He was not a lad to stand for that and he retaliated with such good effect that his opponent went down in a heap on the grass, and did not arise for some seconds. When he did stagger up, and saw Joe calmly waiting for him, the lad moved off.

"You can fight all right," he mumbled. "I've had enough."

Meanwhile Darrell had disposed of his lad, and Tom, who was engaged with a small lad who made a sneering remark, grabbed hold of the chap and shook him until the lad begged for mercy.

Sam and his opponent were still at it hot and heavy when there arose a cry:

"Cheese it—here come the cops!"

Riverside boasted of a small police force, and while it was not very formidable, most of the lads came from homes where a report of their arrest for fighting would meet with severe punishment. Their ardor suddenly cooled and, almost as soon as it had started, the impromptu battle was over. The victorious nine gathered up their belongings and moved off the diamond, jeering at their defeated rivals.

"It was their fault—they started the fights," declared Tom Davis.

"Yes, I guess it was," admitted Darrell. "Well come on, fellows. They beat us, and though I think it wasn't exactly square on some of the decisions, we can take our medicine. We'll do better next time."

"Do you mean me?" demanded Sam half fiercely.

"I mean—all of us," spoke Darrell slowly, "including myself."

"Some excitement; eh?" asked Tom, as he linked his arm in that of Joe Matson and walked along with him.

"Yes, but it was a good game just the same."

"You play, don't you?"

"I used to, at Bentville, where we moved from," answered Joe.

"Have a good team?"

"Pretty good."

"Where'd you play?"

"Well, mostly at pitching. I like that better than anything else."

"Hum!" mused Tom. "It takes a pretty good one to pitch these days. It isn't like it used to be. Pitching is a gift, like poetry I guess. You can't go in and pitch right off the reel."

"I know it," answered Joe quietly. "But it's my one ambition. I want to go to a good boarding school and get on the team as pitcher."

"Well, I hope you do," and Tom laughed frankly. "I wouldn't mind that myself, though I don't know as I care so much for pitching."

"It's the best part of the game!" cried Joe, and his eyes shone and he seemed to lose some of his usual quiet manner. "I'd like it above everything else!"

"Got any curves?" asked the practical Tom.

"Well, I don't know as I have—yet. I'm practicing though."

"Got any speed?"

"They used to say I had, back there in Bentville."

"Hum! Well, I don't believe there's much chance for you here. Sam has the Silver Stars cinched. But he was rotten the last half of to-day's game. That's what made us lose it. Yes, it takes some pumpkins to pitch now-a-days."

The boys walked on down the street after Tom had discarded his suit. Before them and behind them were other players and spectators, talking of nothing but the game and the fight that had followed. The Resolutes, cheering and singing triumphantly, had departed in their big stages, and in the hearts of the Silver Stars was gloom and despair.

"Well, come over and see me sometime," invited Tom, as he parted from Joe.

"I will. You come over and see me."

The boys went their respective ways—Joe walking rather slowly and thinking of what had just taken place.

“How I would like to pitch—and go to boarding school!” he mused as he walked toward his house. As he entered the side door he saw his mother sitting at the dining room table. Something about her attracted his attention—aroused his fears. The cloth had been spread, and though it was supper time, for the game had lasted until late, there were no dishes on the table.

“Why mother!” exclaimed Joe, struck by a queer look on her face. “What is the matter? Has anything happened?”

“Oh Joe!” she exclaimed starting up, as though she had not heard him come in. “Oh, no, nothing is the matter,” she went on, and she tried to smile, but it was only an attempt. “I forgot it was so late. Your father was home, but he went out again.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. He said he had some business to attend to. But I must hurry with the supper. Where were you?”

“At the ball game. There was a fight. Our side lost. Oh, how I wish I had been pitching! If ever I go to that boarding school I’m going to try for the nine, first thing!”

“Oh yes, you’re always talking about a boarding school, Joe. Well, I—I hope you can go.”

“Mother, I’m sure something has happened!” exclaimed Joe, putting his arms around her and patting her on the shoulder, for she was a little woman.

“No, really,” she assured him. “I’m just a little worried, that’s all. Now you can help me set the table if you will. Clara has gone to take her music lesson and isn’t back yet.”

“Of course I will!” exclaimed Joe. “But what are you worried about, mother? I wish you’d tell me.”

“I can’t now, Joe. Perhaps I will some time. It isn’t anything serious—yet,” and with that Mrs. Matson hurried out of the room.

She smiled as she left her son, but when she reached the kitchen the same serious look came over her face again.

“I hope what he fears doesn’t come to pass,” she remarked to herself. “Poor Joe! it would be too bad if he couldn’t go to a boarding school when his heart is so set on it. And to become a pitcher! I wish he had some higher ambition in life, though I suppose all boys are alike at his age,” and she sighed.

"Hum," mused Joe as he went about setting the table, for the Matsons kept no girl and Joe and his sister often helped their mother with the housework when their school duties permitted. "Something is worrying mother," the lad went on. "I hope it isn't anything about father's business in the harvester works. He took a risk when he gave up his position in Bentville and took a new one here. But that was an exciting game all right," and Joe smiled at the recollection as he went on putting the plates around at their places.

Chapter 4: A Row With Sam

"What are you thinking about, Joe?"

It was his sister Clara who asked the question, and she had noticed that her brother was rather dreaming over his books than studying. It was the Monday night after the Saturday when the memorable game with the Resolutes had taken place.

"Oh, nothing much," and Joe roused himself from a reverie and began to pour over his books.

"Well, for 'nothing much' I should say that it was a pretty deep subject," went on Clara with a laugh, as she finished doing her examples. "It isn't one of the girls here, is it Joe? There are a lot of pretty ones in our class."

"Oh—bother!" exclaimed Joe. "Let a fellow alone, can't you, when he's studying? We have some pretty stiff work I tell you!" and he ruffled up his hair, as if that would make his lessons come easier. "It's a heap worse than it was back in Bentville."

"I think so too, but I like it, Joe. We have a real nice teacher, and I've met a lot of pleasant girls. Do you know any of the boys?"

"Hu! I guess you want me to give you an introduction to them!" exclaimed Joe.

"No more than you do to the girls I know," retorted his sister, "so there!"

"Now, now," gently remonstrated Mrs. Matson, looking up from her sewing, "you young folks keep on with your lessons. Your father can't go on reading his paper if you dispute so."

Involuntarily Joe and his sister glanced to where Mr. Matson sat in his easy chair. But he did not seem to be reading, though he held the paper up in front of him. Joe fancied he saw a look of worriment on his father's face, and he wondered if he was vexed over some problem in inventive work, or whether he was troubled over business matters concerning his new position.

Then there came to the lad's mind a memory of his mother's anxiety the night he had come in from the game, and he wondered if the two had any connection. But he knew it would not do to ask, for his father seldom talked over business matters at home.

Finally, seeming to feel Joe's look, Mr. Matson, after a quick glance at his son, began to scan the paper.

"Go on with your studying, Joe and Clara," commanded Mrs. Matson with a smile. "Don't dispute any more."

"I was only asking Joe if he knew any nice boys," spoke Clara in vindication. "I know how fond he was of playing baseball back in Bentville, and I was wondering if he was going to play here."

"Guess I haven't much chance," murmured Joe half gloomily, as he drew idle circles on the back blank leaf of his book.

"Why not?" asked Clara quickly. "The girls say the boys have a good nine here, even if they were beaten last Saturday. There's going to be another game this Saturday, and Helen Rutherford is going to take me."

"Oh, yes, there's a good enough team here," admitted Joe. "In fact the Silver Stars are all right, but every position is filled. I would like to play—I'd like to pitch. I want to get all the practice I can on these small teams, so when I go to boarding school I'll have something to talk about."

"And you're still set on going to boarding school?" asked Mrs. Matson, sighing gently as she looked at her son.

"I certainly am—if it can be managed," replied Joe quickly.

Mr. Matson started so suddenly that the paper rattled loudly, and his wife asked:

"What's the matter, John, did something in the news startle you?"

"Oh—no," he said slowly. "I—I guess I'm a bit nervous. I've been working rather hard lately on an improvement in a corn reaper and binder. It doesn't seem to come just right. I believe I'll go to bed. I'm tired," and with "good-nights" that were not as cheerful as usual he left the room. Mrs. Matson sighed but said nothing, and Joe wondered more than ever if any trouble was brewing. He hoped not. As for Clara she was again bent over her lessons.

The Silver Star nine was variously made up. A number of lads worked in different town industries, one even being employed in the harvester works where Mr. Matson was employed. Others attended school.

Joe Matson had attended the academy in the town of Bentville whence they moved to Riverside, and on arriving in the latter place had at once sought

admission to the high school. He was given a brief examination, and placed in the junior class, though in some of the studies the pupils there were a little ahead of him, consequently he had to do some hard studying.

The ambition to attend a boarding school had been in Joe's mind for a long while, and as his father was in moderate circumstances, and soon hoped to make considerable from his patents, Joe reasoned that his parents could then afford to send him.

Among others on the nine who attended the high school were Darrell Blackney and Sam Morton, who were in the senior class, and Tom Davis, whose acquaintance Joe had made soon after coming to Riverside. There was a school nine, but it was made up of the smaller boys and Joe had no desire to join this. In fact none of the lads who were on the Silver Stars belonged to the school team.

"Well, I'm through, thank goodness!" finally exclaimed Clara, as she closed her books.

"And I am too," added Joe, a moment later. "Hope I don't flunk to-morrow."

"Are you going to the game Saturday?" asked Clara.

"Oh, I guess so. Wish I was going in it, but that's too much to hope for."

"Don't you know any one on the nine?"

"Yes, Tom Davis."

"He's the boy back of us, isn't he? His sister Mabel is in my class."

"Yes," assented Joe, "but Tom is only a substitute."

"Maybe you could be that at first, and then get a regular place," suggested Clara.

"Um!" murmured Joe. He didn't have a very high opinion of girls' knowledge of baseball, even his sister's.

When Joe reached home from school the following afternoon he saw his mother standing on the front steps with a letter in her hand.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed, "I was just waiting for you. Your father——"

"Is there anything the matter with father?" the lad gasped, his thoughts going with a rush to one or two little scenes that had alarmed him lately.

"No, nothing at all," answered his mother with a smile. "But he just hurried home from the factory with this note and he wanted you, as soon as you came home, to take it to Moorville. It's for a Mr. Rufus Holdney there. The address is on it, and I guess you can find him all right. You're to wait for an answer. Go on your wheel.

It's only a few miles to Moorville, and a straight road, so your father says."

"I know where it is," answered Joe. "Tom Davis has relatives there. He pointed out the road to me one day. I'll go right away. Here, catch hold of my books, mother, and I'll get my wheel out of the barn," for a barn went with the house Mr. Matson had rented.

A little later the lad was speeding down the country road that pleasant spring afternoon. Joe was a good rider and was using considerable strength on the pedals when suddenly, as he turned a sharp curve, he saw coming toward him another cyclist. He had barely time to note that it was Sam Morton, the pitcher of the Silver Stars, and to utter a warning shout when he crashed full into the other lad.

In a moment there was a mix-up of wheels, legs and arms, while a cloud of dust momentarily hid everything from sight. At first Joe did not know whether or not he was hurt, or whether Sam was injured. Fortunately Joe had instinctively put on the brake with all his strength, and he supposed the other lad had done likewise.

Then, as the dust cleared away, and Joe began to pull his arms and legs out of the tangle, and arise, he saw that Sam was doing the same thing.

"Hope you're not hurt much!" was Joe's first greeting.

"Humph! It isn't your fault if I'm not," was the ungracious answer, as Sam felt of his pitching arm. "What do you mean by crashing into a fellow that way for, anyhow?"

"I didn't mean to. I didn't know that curve was so sharp. I'd never ridden on this road before."

"Well, why didn't you blow your horn or ring your bell or—or something?"

"Why didn't you?" demanded Joe with equal right.

"Never mind. Don't give me any of your talk. You're one of the fresh juniors at school, aren't you?"

"I don't know that I'm 'fresh,'" replied Joe quietly, "but I am a junior. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I couldn't help it."

"Yes you could, if you knew anything about riding a wheel."

"I tell you I couldn't," and Joe spoke a bit sharply. "I was into you before I knew it. And besides, you ran into me as much as I did into you."

"I did not. If you don't know enough to ride a wheel, keep off the roads!" snarled the pitcher. "If I'm stiff for Saturday's game it will be your fault."

"I hope you won't be stiff," spoke Joe, and he said it sincerely.

"And if my wheel is broken you'll have to pay for it," went on Sam.

"I don't think that's right," said Joe firmly. "It was as much your fault as mine, and my wheel may be broken too. I'm going to look," he added as he lifted his bicycle from where it was entangled with Sam's.

A bent pedal, which would not interfere with its use, was all the damage Joe's wheel had sustained and beyond a few bent spokes and a punctured tire Sam's seemed to have suffered no great harm.

"I'll help you straighten those spokes," said Joe cheerfully. "It won't take but a minute. I can have my father straighten my pedal at the factory. And I'll help you mend and pump up your tire. I'm sorry——"

"Look here!" burst out Sam in a rage, "I don't want any of your help. You're too fresh. You come banging into a fellow, knocking him all over and then you think you can square things by offering to help him. I don't want any of your help!"

"Oh, very well," replied Joe quietly. "Then I'll be going on. I've got an errand to do. But I'd like to help you."

"Mind your own business!" snapped Sam, still rubbing his pitching arm. He made no motion to pick up his wheel.

Joe was half minded to make an angry retort but he thought better of it. He wheeled his bicycle to the hard side-path of the road, and, ascertaining that his letter was safe, prepared to mount and ride away.

"And mind you, if my arm is stiff, and I can't pitch Saturday it will be your fault, and I'll tell the fellows so," called Sam as he leaned over to pick up his wheel.

"All right, only you know it isn't so," replied Joe quietly.

As he pedaled on he looked back and saw Sam straightening some of the bent spokes. The pitcher scowled at him.

"Hum," mused Joe as he speeded up. "Not a very good beginning for getting on the nine—a run-in with the pitcher. Well, I guess I wouldn't be in it anyhow. I guess they think I'm not in their class. But I will be—some day!" and with a grim tightening of his lips Joe Matson rode on.

Chapter 5: Joe Helps The Manager

"Well now, I'm real sorry," said Mrs. Holdney when, a little later, Joe dismounted at her door, and held out the letter for her husband. "Rufus isn't home. You can

leave the letter for him, though."

"No, I have to have an answer," replied Joe. "I think perhaps I'd better wait."

"Well, maybe you had, though I don't know when Rufus will be back. Is it anything of importance?"

"I guess it must be," spoke the lad, for, though he did not know the contents of his father's letter, he reasoned that it would be on no unimportant errand that he would be sent to Moorville.

"Hum," mused Mrs. Holdney. "Well, if you want to wait all right, though as I said I don't know when my husband will be back."

"Do you know where he's gone? Could I go after him?" asked Joe eagerly. He was anxious to deliver the letter, get an answer, and return home before dark.

"Well, now, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Mrs. Holdney. "Of course you might do that. Rufus has gone down town, and most likely you'll find him in the hardware store of Mr. Jackson. He said he had some business to transact with him, and he'll likely be there for some time."

"Then I'll ride down there on my wheel. I guess I can find the place. Is it on the main street?"

"Yes, turn off this road when you get to the big granite horse-drinking trough and swing in to your right. Then turn to your left when you get to the post-office and that's Main Street. Mr. Jackson's store is about a block in."

The lad repeated the woman's directions over in his mind as he rode along, and he had no difficulty in picking out the hardware store. He was wondering how he would know Mr. Holdney, but concluded that one of the clerks could point him out.

"Yes, Mr. Holdney is here," said a man behind the counter to whom Joe applied. "He's in the office with Mr. Jackson."

"I wonder if I could send a letter in to him," ventured the lad, for he did not want to wait any longer than he had to.

"I'm afraid not," answered the clerk. "Mr. Jackson is very strict about being disturbed when he's talking business."

"Then I guess I'll have to wait," said Joe with a sigh. "I wonder if he'll be in there long?"

"I wouldn't want to say for sure," spoke the clerk, leaning over the counter in a confidential manner and speaking in a whisper. "I wouldn't even dare to guess," he went on with a look toward the private office whence came the murmur of

voices, “but I’ll venture to state that it will be some time. Mr. Jackson never does anything in a hurry.”

“Does Mr. Holdney?”

“Yes, he’s just the opposite. He’s as quick as a steel trap. Too quick, that’s the trouble. He and Mr. Jackson are good friends, but when Mr. Holdney springs something sudden on my boss, why Mr. Jackson is slower than ever, thinking it over. I guess you’ll have to wait some time. Is there anything you’d like to buy?”

“No, I think not,” said Joe with a smile, and then he sat down on one of the stools near the counter while the clerk went off to wait on a customer. The lad was getting impatient after nearly an hour had passed and there was no sign of Mr. Holdney coming out. The murmur of voices continued to come from the private office—one voice quick and snappy, and the other slow and drawling—an indication of the character of the two men.

“I wish they’d hurry!” thought Joe. He began to pace back and forth the length of the store, and he was just thinking he would have to ride home in the darkness, and was wondering whether there was oil in his bicycle lamp, when the door of the private office opened and two men came out.

“Thank goodness!” exclaimed Joe to himself. The men were still talking, but Joe concluded that their business was about over so he chanced going up to them.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but I have a letter for Mr. Holdney. It’s from my father, Mr. Matson.”

“Eh, what’s—that—son?” asked the older of the two men, in drawling tones.

“It’s for me. I’m Mr. Holdney!” exclaimed the other quickly. “From Mr. Matson, eh? Well tell him I can’t help him any more. I haven’t any spare—but wait a minute, I’ll write my answer.”

“Hadn’t—you—better—read—the—letter—first,” mildly and slowly suggested Mr. Jackson.

“Humph! I know what it is all right!” exclaimed the other quickly. “But I’ll read it. Let’s have it!” He almost snapped it from the lad’s hand and Joe wondered what could be the business relations between his father and this man.

With a flourish and a quick motion Mr. Holdney tore open the envelope and read the letter almost at a glance.

“Hum!” he exclaimed. “Just as I expected. No, I’m done with that business. I can’t do any more. You may tell your father—hold on, though, I’ll write it,” and, whipping out a lead pencil Mr. Holdney scribbled something on the back of Mr. Matson’s note.

"So you're John Matson's son; eh?" he asked of Joe.

"Yes, sir."

"Hum! Go to school?"

"Yes, the Riverside High."

"Hum! Ever invent anything?"

"No, not yet," answered Joe with a smile.

"That's right—never do it. It's a poor business. Play ball?"

"I did in Bentville where we lived, but I haven't had a chance here yet."

"Hum! Yes, Bentville. That's where I met your father. Here's the answer. There you are. Now don't lose it," and quickly handing the communication to Joe, Mr. Holdney turned and resumed his talk with the hardware merchant.

Joe was a little dazed by the quickness of it all, and there were many questions running through his mind. Somehow the manner of Mr. Holdney—the message he had started to ask Joe to deliver by word of mouth, his apparent refusal of something Mr. Matson had evidently asked him to do—all made Joe vaguely uneasy. He connected it with his father's nervousness the night before and with his mother's anxiety.

"But there's no use worrying until I have to," concluded Joe with a boy's philosophy as he left the hardware store, and truth to tell, he was thinking more of his chances of going to boarding school in the fall perhaps, and whether or not he would get an opportunity to play ball, than he was of any possible trouble.

On leaving the hardware store Joe was surprised to find it growing dusk. Gathering clouds added to the gloom and he made up his mind that the last part of his homeward journey would be made in darkness.

"Guess I'll see if I have any oil in the lamp," he remarked as he was about to mount his wheel. "If I haven't I can get some here." But he found, on shaking the lantern, that it was filled enough to carry him to Riverside, and he was soon pedaling along that country road.

The clouds continued to gather, and as the journey back was partly up hill, and as the bent pedal did not permit of fast riding, Joe soon found it necessary to alight and set the lamp aglow.

He was riding on, looking carefully ahead of him, to avoid stones and ruts that the gleam of light revealed, when, as he came to rather a lonely spot on the road, he heard, just ahead of him, a commotion.

There was a sound of carriage wheels scraping on the iron body guards, the

tramping of a horse's feet, and then a voice called out:

"Whoa now! Stand still, can't you, until I see what's the matter? Whoa! Something's broken, that's evident, worse luck! And I'm two miles from nowhere. Whoa, now!"

"Where have I heard that voice before?" mused Joe as he rode more slowly so as not to have another collision in the darkness.

He could hear some one jump to the ground and then the restless horse quieted down under the soothing words of the driver.

"Yes, it's broken all right," the voice went on. "And how in the mischief am I going to mend it? Whoa, now!"

Then Joe rode up, and in the glow of his light he saw Darrell Blackney, the manager of the Silver Stars, who was standing beside a carriage one side of the shafts of which hung down from the axle. The bolt had evidently broken.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe, dismounting.

"Who's that?" quickly asked Darrell.

"I'm Joe Matson," was the answer. "I know you. I'm in the junior high class."

"Oh, yes. Matson, I think I heard Tom Davis speak of you. Well, I've had an accident. I was out driving when all at once one side of the shafts fell down. It's a bad break I'm afraid; bolt sheared off."

"It's a wonder your horse didn't run away."

"Oh, Prince is pretty steady; aren't you Prince old fellow?" and Darrell patted the animal's nose. "But what the mischief am I to do? It's too far to go to the next town and leave Prince here, and I can't ride him, for he isn't used to it and might throw me off."

"Can I help you?" asked Joe. "I might ride to the nearest place and get a bolt, if you told me what kind."

"All the places would be closed by this time I guess," was the rueful answer. "Much obliged to you just the same. I certainly am in a pickle! Next time I go out driving I'll bring part of a hardware store along."

"What sort of a bolt is it?" asked Joe.

"Oh, just an ordinary carriage one, flat headed. Bring your light here, if you don't mind, and I'll take a look at it. I could only tell it was broken by feeling in the dark."

In the glow of the bicycle lamp it could be seen that the bolt had broken squarely

in two in the middle, and could not be used again. But at the sight of it, as Darrell held the two parts in his hand, Joe uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" asked the manager of the Silver Stars.

"I think I have the very thing!" said Joe quickly. "I've got some spare bolts in my tool bag. They may not be the same size, but they'll hold the shaft in until you get home I think. I'll take a look."

"Good for you!" cried Darrell. "Most anything will do in a pinch. Even a piece of wire, but I can't find any along the road in the dark. I hope you have something," and while Joe opened his tool bag Darrell patted the somewhat restive horse.

Chapter 6: Joe Has Hopes

"Yes, here's the very thing, I guess!" said Joe, after rummaging about in his leather tool case. He produced a short but heavy bolt with a nut.

"It isn't exactly the same thing," remarked Darrell, after looking at it carefully, "but it will do, if it's long enough. Would you mind holding Prince's head while I try it? He might start up, just as I got the shaft in place, and hurt my fingers, if he didn't make me drop the bolt. Then we'd have a sweet time hunting for it in the dark."

Joe went to the animal's head and patted the cold, velvety nose while the other lad lifted up the dropped shaft and fitted it in place. He was fumbling about in the flickering light of the bicycle lantern which he had temporarily fastened to the dashboard.

"Will it do?" asked Joe.

"Yes, it's just the cheese. Lucky I met you, or, rather that you met me, or I don't know what I would have done. The bolt is just long enough. Now if I can get the nut on——"

"There's a wrench in my tool bag," interrupted Joe. "Shall I get it for you?"

"No, thanks, you stay by Prince. I can find it. You haven't been in town long, have you?" asked Darrell, as he was working away over the nut, which was a little tight.

"No, about a week. I was at the Resolute ball game though."

"You were? It was a shame it broke up the way it did, but I don't think it was our fault, though Sam Morton is pretty quick tempered."

Joe had good reason to know that.

"No," he answered from the darkness near the horse's head, "it was the fault of the Resolutes all right. They ought to have been satisfied after pulling the game out of the fire the way they did."

"I should say so! They never ought to have won it, and they wouldn't have, only Sam sort of—well they got his 'goat' I guess."

"Yes," assented Joe, while Darrell went on fumbling with the wrench and nut.

"Do you play at all?" came the manager's voice from the vicinity of the flickering light.

"Oh, yes," and Joe's tone was eager while his heart was strangely beating. It was a chance he had never dared hope for, to have the manager of the Silver Stars ask him that.

"Where?" came the next inquiry.

"In Bentville, where I used to live."

"Oh. Have a good team?"

"Pretty fair."

"Where'd you play?"

"I used to pitch." There was a pause and then, emboldened by what had happened, Joe went on. "I don't suppose there's a vacancy in your nine, is there?" and he laughed half whimsically.

"No, hardly, that is, not in the box," said Darrell slowly. "Sam has his faults, but he's the best pitcher we've had in a long time and I guess we'll keep him. There, that's fixed," he went on, tapping the bolt to see that it was firmly in place. "Now I can go on, I guess. I'm a thousand times obliged to you. I don't know what I'd have done only for you. After this I'm going to carry a light, and some spare bolts."

He handed Joe back the wrench and took the lamp off the dashboard.

"I'll give you a bolt in place of this the next time I see you," the manager went on, as he held the lamp out to our hero.

"Oh, it isn't necessary. I don't need it for my wheel. It was just one of some odds and ends that I carry with me."

Darrell stood looking at Joe, whose face was illuminated brightly by the full focus of the lamp. The manager seemed struck by something.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "you look as if you were built to play ball. Were you at it long?"

"Oh, a couple of years."

"Pitch all that time?"

"Oh, no, only just the last few months of the season. Our regular pitcher left and I filled in."

"I see. Hum, well, as I said we haven't any vacancy in the box, but by Jove! come to think of it I might give you a chance!"

Joe's heart leaped wildly and he could hardly answer.

"Can you, really?" he asked.

"Yes, but not as a regular, of course—at least that is not right off the bat. But if you'd like to try for place at centre field I believe I can manage it."

Joe's heart was a little despondent. Centre field was not a very brilliant place in which to shine with the Stars, but it was a start and he realized that.

"I'd be glad of the chance," he managed to say.

"All right, I'll keep you in mind. You see our regular centre fielder, Jed McGraw, is going to leave. His folks are moving out west and we'll have to have some one in his place. I don't know when he's going, but it's this week or next. I'd like to do something for you, to sort of pay you for what you did for me to-night, and——"

"Oh, I don't want anything for this!" exclaimed Joe.

"I know you don't, but it just happened so. I might not have known you except for this accident, and as I said we will need some one to fill in at centre field. Len Oswald is the regular substitute, but he doesn't practice much, and he's got a job over at Fordham so he can't always be sure of getting off Saturday afternoons, which is when we mostly play. So I'll put you down as sub now and perhaps as regular—it depends on Len."

"Thanks!" Joe managed to say and he found himself hoping that Len would have to work every Saturday during the season.

"We need some one with experience," went on Darrell, "and I'm glad I could give you the chance. Tom Davis was saying you got mixed up in the row the other day."

"Yes. I seem to be getting the habit," replied Joe with a laugh. "I had one with Sam Morton on this road a little while ago."

"You don't say so! How did it happen?"

Joe gave all the details.

"Hum! Well, Sam sure has a quick temper," went on the young manager. "But

he's all right soon after it," he added in extenuation. "He'll be friendly with you in a few days and forget all about it. I wouldn't hold a grudge against him, if I were you."

"Oh, I shan't. It was both our faults."

"Well, I'll be getting on," remarked Darrell, after a pause. "Come and see me sometime. I'll see you at school to-morrow, and if there's anything doing I'll let you know."

The two boys' hands met in a friendly clasp and then the manager, getting into his carriage, drove off. A little later, his heart filled with hope, Joe, having put back his lantern and tool bag pedaled toward home.

"This was a lucky day for me, even if it did look bad after that crash with Sam Morton," he said to himself. "I'm going to play ball, after all!"

There was rather a grave look on Mr. Matson's face when Joe handed him the reply from Mr. Holdney, and told of his interview.

"So he can't help me—Oh, well, never mind," and Mr. Matson turned aside and went into the room where he kept a desk. Mrs. Matson followed, closing the door after her, and for some time the voices of the two could be heard in low but earnest conversation.

"What's the matter; nothing wrong I hope?" asked Clara.

"Oh, I guess not," answered Joe, though he was vaguely uneasy himself. Then came the thought of his talk with the baseball manager and his heart was light again.

Supper was rather a quiet affair that night, and Mr. Matson spoke but little, quite in contrast to his usual cheerful flow of conversation. Mrs. Matson, too, seemed preoccupied.

"I think I'm going to get on the Stars!" exclaimed Joe, when he got a chance to tell of his experiences that day.

"That's good," said Mr. Matson heartily. "There's no game like baseball."

"But it doesn't fit a boy for anything," complained Mrs. Matson. "It doesn't help in any of the professions."

"It's a profession in itself!" declared Joe stoutly.

"I hope you don't intend to adopt it," spoke his sister.

"Oh, I don't know. I might do worse. Look at some of those big New York players getting thousands of dollars a year."

"But look how long it takes them to get to that place," objected Clara, who liked to argue.

"Oh, well, I'm young yet," laughed Joe.

In his room that night, while preparing for bed Joe got to thinking of the possibility mentioned by Darrell Blackney.

"I'm going to play my head off in centre field," said Joe, "and I'm going to practice batting, too. Stick work counts. I'm going to practice pitching, also. Who knows, maybe I'll get a chance in the box if Sam ever slumps.

"Wow! If I ever do!" and standing before an imaginary batter Joe flung out his arm as if delivering a swift curve. With a crash his fist hit a picture on the wall and brought it clattering down to the floor.

"What's that?" called Clara sharply from the next room.

"Oh, I was just practicing pitching," answered Joe sheepishly, as he picked up the picture, the glass of which had fortunately not broken.

"Well, you'd better practice going to sleep," responded his sister with a laugh.

Joe smiled. He had great hopes for the future.

Chapter 7: Laughed At

"What's that in your pocket, Joe?"

"Which pocket?"

"Your coat. I declare, you've got something in both pockets," and Clara approached her brother as if with the intention of making a personal inspection of two big bulges on either side of his coat. "What are they?" she persisted, as Joe backed away. Brother and sister had just gotten up from the breakfast table, and were about to start to school.

"Oh, never mind!" exclaimed Joe hastily, as he looked for his cap. "Got your lessons, Clara?"

"Of course I have. But I'm curious to know what makes your pockets bulge out so. Don't you know it will spoil your coat?"

"I don't care," and Joe made another hasty move to get out of reach of Clara's outstretched hand. But he was not successful, and, with a laugh, his sister caught hold of the bulging pocket on his left side.

"A ball!" she declared. "A baseball upon my word! Two of them! Oh, Joe, are you

really going to play on the nine Saturday?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll get a chance if Jed McGraw leaves in time. But I'm taking a couple of old balls to practice throwing this afternoon when I come from school."

"You're starting in early," commented Clara. "I hope you don't sleep with a baseball under your pillow the way we girls do with pieces of wedding cake," and she laughed merrily.

"I'd be willing to sleep with a ball and a bat under my pillow if I thought I'd get in the game by it," admitted Joe frankly. "But I'm not hoping too much. Well, I'm going. Good-bye momsey," and he stopped to kiss his mother before he hastened away to school. He looked at her closely to discover whether there was any trace of worry, but she smiled at him.

"I may not be home early," he told her. "I'm going down to the fairgrounds."

"What for?" she asked quickly. "There isn't a show there, is there?"

"No, but I want to do a little baseball practicing, and that place is well out of the way."

"Baseball practice on the fairgrounds. How——"

But she did not wait to finish her question for she exclaimed:

"My cake is burning in the oven. Good-bye, Joe!" and she ran to the kitchen.

"I wonder what Sam Morton will say?" Joe reflected as he walked along. "I certainly hope his arm isn't lame, even if it was as much his fault as mine. I don't want him to tell the fellows I'm to blame for him losing a game—if he should."

Fearing that the same thing might happen to him as when Clara laughed at him for having the two baseballs in his pockets, Joe slipped to his desk as soon as he reached the school, and hid the balls away back among his books. The balls were two old ones he had used when on the Bentville nine, and they were still in fair condition.

"I'm not going to let the fellows get on to the fact that I'm practicing, until there's more of a chance for me than there is now," thought our hero, as he went out on the school grounds to watch the lads at play.

An impromptu game was going on, but Joe did not join. Darrell Blackney passed him, and in answer to Joe's nod of greeting asked:

"Did you get home all right?"

"Oh, yes. How about you?"

"Fine. The bolt was all right. I haven't forgotten. I'll see McGraw to-day and find out when he's going to leave. Then if Oswald can't say for sure whether he'll be with us, you'll go in at centre field."

"Good!" exclaimed Joe, his eyes bright with anticipation.

As Darrell passed on, Joe saw Sam Morton approaching. At first he had a notion of turning away and avoiding what he felt would be an unpleasant scene. But Joe was nothing of a coward and he realized that, sooner or later, he would have to meet the pitcher with whom he had had the collision. So he stood his ground.

"How's your arm?" he asked pleasantly, as Sam approached.

"Hu! None the better for what you did to it."

"What I did?" and Joe's voice took on a surprised tone. "Do you still insist it was my fault?"

"Pretty near," went on Sam, but Joe noticed that he was not quite so vindictive as before. "It isn't as stiff as I thought it would be, though."

"I hope you can pitch all right Saturday," went on Joe. He wanted very much to hint at the fact that he, too, might be in the game, but Sam was not a lad to invite confidences, especially after what had taken place. Joe liked comradeship. He liked the company of boys of his own age and he was just "hungry" to talk baseball. But, aside from Tom Davis, as yet he had no chums with whom he could gossip about the great pastime.

In Bentville he was looked up to as one of the nine, and, though the team was not as good a one as was the Silver Stars, still it was a team, and Joe was one of the principal players. Coming to a strange town, and being distinctly out of the game, made him feel like a "cat in a strange garret," as he said afterward.

But with a grim tightening of his lips he made up his mind not to give way to gloomy thoughts, and he determined that he would be on the town team and one of the best players.

As the warning bell rang, Tom Davis came hurrying across the school campus.

"I called for you!" he shouted to Joe who, with a crowd of other lads, was going in the building, "but you'd gone."

"Thanks," replied Joe, grateful for the friendly spirit shown. "I'll wait next time." He liked Tom, and was glad to have him for a chum.

Joe thought lessons would never be finished that day, but the classes were finally dismissed and then, without waiting for Tom, though he thought this might be construed as rather unfriendly, our hero hastened off in the direction of the fairgrounds. There was a high wooden fence around this plot, and it gave Joe

just the chance he wanted, for he was going to practice pitching, and he didn't want any witnesses.

"I wish I had half a dozen balls," he murmured as he went in through one of the gates which was unlocked. "I wouldn't have to chase back and forth so often. But two will do for a while."

He laid his books down on the grass, took out the horsehide spheres and, measuring a distance from the fence about equal to the space from the pitcher's box to home plate, he began to pitch the balls.

With dull thuds the balls struck the fence, one after the other, and fell to the ground. Joe picked them up, took his place again in the imaginary box, and repeated the performance.

His arm, that was a bit stiff at first, from lack of practice since coming to Riverside, gradually became limber. He knew that his speed, too, was increasing. He could not judge of his curves, and, truth to tell he did not have very good ones as yet, for he had only recently learned the knack. But he had the right ideas and a veteran professional pitcher, who was a friend of one of the Bentville nine's members, had showed Joe the proper manner to hold and deliver the ball.

"I wish I had some one back there to give me a line on myself," thought Joe, as he pitched away, a solitary figure on the grounds. "I don't know whether I'm getting them over the plate, or a mile beyond," for he had laid down a flat stone to serve as "home."

"Anyhow this will improve my speed," he reasoned, "and speed is needed now-a-days as much as curves."

Time and again he pitched his two horsehides, ran to pick them up as they dropped at the foot of the fence, and then he raced back to his "box" to repeat the performance. He was rather tiring of it, and his arm was beginning to feel numb in spite of his enthusiasm, when he heard some one laughing. The sound came from behind him, and, turning quickly, Joe saw Sam Morton standing leaning up against his wheel, and contemplating him with mirth showing on his face.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Sam. "This is pretty good. What are you trying to do, Matson, knock the fence down? If you are, why don't you take a hammer or some stones instead of baseballs? This is rich! Ha! Ha!"

For a moment Joe was tempted to make an angry answer, for the hot blood of shame mounted to his cheeks. Then he said quietly, and with as much good-nature as he could summon on the spur of the moment:

"I'm practicing, that's all. I came here as I didn't want to lose the balls, and the

fence makes a good backstop.”

“Practicing, eh? What for?” and once more Sam laughed in an insulting manner.

“To improve my pitching. There may be a chance to get on the team, I understand.”

“What team; the Silver Stars?”

Sam’s voice had a harsh note in it.

“Yes.” And Joe nodded.

“So you’re practicing pitching, eh? And you hope to get on our nine. Well let me tell you one thing, Matson; you won’t pitch on the Silver Stars as long as I’m on deck, and I intend to remain for quite a while yet. Pitching practice, eh? Ho! That’s pretty good! What you’d better practice is running bases. We may let you run for some of the fellows, if you’re real good. Or how would you like to carry the bats or be the water boy? I understand there’s a vacancy there. Pitcher! Ha! Ha!” and Sam doubled up in mirth. Joe’s face flushed, but he said nothing.

Chapter 8: A Mean Protest

Finally Sam ceased his laughter, straightened up and prepared to ride out of the fairgrounds on his wheel.

“I was just going past,” he said, in needless explanation, “when I heard something banging against the fence. First I thought it might be one of the cattle left over from the last show, but when I saw it was you, Matson—Oh, my! It’s too rich! I’ll have to tell the boys.”

“Look here!” exclaimed Joe, who disliked as much as any one being laughed at, “what have you got against me, anyhow? Are you afraid I’ll displace you as pitcher?”

“What’s that? Not much. You couldn’t do that you know,” and Sam laughed again.

“Then what do you want to be so mean for?” asked Joe.

“None of your business, if you want to know,” snapped Sam. “But if you think you’re going to get on our team you’ve got another think coming. Look out, now, don’t break the fence with those balls, or the fair committee might make you pay for it,” and with this parting insult Sam rode out of the grounds.

Joe’s heart was beating fast, and he clenched his hands. He would liked to have gone after Sam and given him a well deserved thrashing, but he knew that

would never do.

"I've just got to grin and bear it!" murmured Joe through his clenched teeth. "If the fellows laugh at me I'll have to let 'em laugh. After all I can stand it, and I do want to get on the team.

"Queer why Sam Morton should be so down on me. I don't see his reason unless it's jealousy, or because he's mad at me for running into him. Maybe it's both.

"Well, there's no use practicing any longer. My arm is tired, and besides he might be hiding behind the fence to laugh some more. I'll have to find a different place if I want to practice getting up my speed and curves."

Picking up the balls and his books Joe slowly made his way out of the grounds. Sam Morton was nowhere in sight, for which the young ball player was glad.

"Maybe this will end it," thought Joe. "He just wanted to amuse himself at my expense." But our hero was soon to find that the vindictive spirit of the pitcher was not quelled.

"Coming out to see us practice this afternoon?" asked Tom Davis of Joe several days later. "We're getting ready to play the Red Stockings of Rutherford, Saturday."

"Sure I'll come," answered Joe. "Will it be a good game?"

"It ought to. The Red Stockings used to have a good nine but they struck a slump and lately we've been beating them. But I hear they have a new pitcher and they may make it hard for us. Say, what's this yarn Sam is telling about you practicing down on the fairgrounds."

"Oh, it's true enough," answered Joe with a flush. "I thought I'd get up some speed. I've got a chance to get on the nine."

"Is that so; I hadn't heard it. Gee! I hope you do. How you going to manage it?"

"Well, I don't know as Darrell wants it known," was the answer, "but I'll tell you," and Joe proceeded to relate his talk with the manager, about the prospective leaving of McGraw.

"That's so, Jed is going away," admitted Tom. "I had forgotten about that. Say, I hope he leaves before Saturday and then you can get a chance to play."

"What about Len Oswald, the substitute centre fielder?"

"Oh, Len is practically out of it. He can't get off Saturday afternoons any more. Too much business in that Fordham grocery where he works. That's a good thing for you. I'm real glad of it, Joe. But say, if you want to practice pitching, why didn't you ask me to catch for you?"

"I didn't want to bother you?"

"Aw, get out. I'd be glad to do it. Next time you want to try it tip me off and we'll go some place where Sam can't bother us. He's a mean chap sometimes. I don't like him, but some of the fellows think he's all there. He sure can pitch, and I guess that's why we keep him. But come on, let's go to practice. There may be a scrub game and you can get in on it."

Joe and Tom found quite a crowd assembled on the Riverside diamond when they arrived. The nine and the substitutes were in uniforms, and Darrell Blackney and George Rankin were talking to the team, giving them some points about the coming game with the Red Stockings.

"I guess we've got enough for a scrub game," announced the captain, as Joe and Tom strolled up. "Tom, you play first on the scrub. And let's see—what's your name?" and he turned to Joe, who introduced himself.

"He's a friend of mine," added Tom, "so treat him right."

"Good!" exclaimed the captain. "Well, he can play on the scrub if he wants to. Out in the field," he added.

"Oh, yes, that's Matson, whom I was telling you about," put in the manager, and then he added something in a low voice which Joe could not catch.

"Play ball!" called the umpire, and the impromptu contest was underway. Joe narrowly watched Sam's pitching and even though he regarded the lad as unfriendly to him, our hero could not but admit that his rival in the box was doing good work.

"But I think I can equal him if I have a chance," thought Joe, and he was not given to idle boasting, either. "Oh, if I only get the chance!" he exclaimed in a whisper.

Then a high fly came his way and he had to get down to business and stop his day-dreaming. He ran back to get under the ball, and made a pretty one-handed catch. There was some applause from the little group of spectators.

"Good eye!" yelled Tom Davis.

"That's the stuff!" cried some one else, and Joe felt a warm thrill of pleasure as he threw the ball in.

Of course the first team won, for the scrub was composed of odds and ends, with some substitutes from the Silver Stars, but Joe had done his best to hold down the score.

"Good work, Matson," complimented Darrell, when the contest was over. "By the way, I've about decided in your case. You can get ready to play centre field

Saturday. McGraw can't be with us, and we can't count on Oswald. Have you a uniform?"

"Yes," said Joe eagerly.

"A uniform; what for?" asked Sam Morton quickly. He had come up behind Joe and Darrell, and had heard the last part of the conversation.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you fellows that Matson is our new member of the team," went on the manager. "Shake hands with him, boys. I've been watching him play to-day and I think with a little practice he'll make good."

"Where's he going to play?" demanded Sam roughly, while the lads crowded around Joe, congratulating him, asking him questions as to where he had played ball before, and shaking hands with him. "Where's he going to play?" and Sam pointed what seemed like an accusing finger at Joe.

"Centre field—McGraw's place," answered the manager briefly.

"Regular or substitute?" demanded Sam.

"Practically a regular," replied Darrell. "We can't count on Oswald any more, now that his busy season has begun."

Every member of the Silver Stars save Sam had shaken hands with Joe. The pitcher now stood facing our hero.

"I want to protest!" suddenly exclaimed Sam, looking Joe full in the face.

"Why?" asked Darrell.

"What business is it of yours, anyhow, Sam?" asked the captain. "Darrell and I have settled this. Matson plays."

"Then I want my protest noted!" went on Sam angrily. "We're supposed to be a local team—every one on it belongs in town."

"So does Joe Matson!" broke in Tom Davis.

"Well, he's only just moved in, and how do we know but what he'll move out again?" demanded Sam. "I protest against him being a regular, or even a substitute, member of the Silver Stars!"

Chapter 9: Joe In The Game

There was a period of silence following Sam's unfair protest. Then could be heard a low murmur from some of his mates.

"Oh, what's eating him, anyhow?"

"What's he got against Matson?"

"Something has Sam by the ear all right."

"Yes, guess he didn't like the way the scrub batted him around."

These were some of the comments made, not loud enough for Sam to hear, for he was a power in the nine, and none of the lads wanted to get on bad terms with him.

For a moment all eyes were turned on Sam and then toward Joe who, it can easily be imagined, was much embarrassed.

"I don't think your protest is a fair one," said Darrell at length.

"I don't think so either," added Captain George Rankin. "Just because Matson is a newcomer in town is no reason why he can't play with us."

"Sure, that's right!" put in Seth Potter. "You weren't born here yourself, Sam, and neither were lots of us. We moved here."

"I've lived in Riverside nearly all my life," snapped the pitcher, "and I like to see a representative team. If we need a new member why not pick one who has been living here longer than a couple of weeks?"

"Look here!" exclaimed Darrell. "I don't think this is fair to me."

"How do you mean?" asked Sam, for the manager had spoken with some warmth.

"Just this much. You elected me manager and the captain and I were to select the players. Now, when we make our choice, there comes a kick. It isn't right. Rankin and I decided to give Matson a chance, and he gets it. That goes, too!" and the manager looked straight at Sam.

"Oh, well, if you put it that way I suppose I might as well keep still about it," and Sam, shrugging his shoulders, turned away. He had not yet shaken hands with Joe.

"As for there being other players just as good and who have lived here longer, that may be true," went on Darrell. "I'm not saying Matson is the only fellow I could pick for centre field, and I'm not saying anything against any of the fellows on the scrub when I don't take them. We want the best team we can get to represent the Silver Stars and Matson is my choice for the place. If you want to go over my head——"

"No! No!" came a chorus of objections. "It's all right!"

"Then Matson plays Saturday," concluded the manager. "All of you be out for practice to-morrow afternoon again. Matson, report in uniform."

"All right," and Joe's heart was fairly thumping under his coat. The chance he had longed for had come at last.

As Sam was walking away Joe resolved on a bold stroke, rather a grandstand play as he confessed to himself afterward, but he could not forego it. Striding up to the disgruntled pitcher Joe held out his hand and asked:

"Won't you shake?"

Sam turned and faced him. For several seconds he stood staring Joe straight in the eyes while the crowd of boys looked on. Then with a sneer, and ignoring the proffered hand, Sam said:

"I prefer to pick my own friends. I don't want them made for me."

He turned on his heel and walked off.

There was another period of silence like that following his protest. Then some one said:

"Well, I'm glad I haven't got his disposition."

"What's that?" cried Sam angrily, and turning back he seemed about to rush at the throng he faced.

"There now, that'll do!" exclaimed Darrell, who was anxious to avoid a scene. "Forget it, fellows. Sam, you get your arm good and limber for Saturday. We want to beat the Red Stockings by a big score to make up for what the Resolutes did to us last Saturday. I'm going to arrange for another game with them soon, and maybe we can turn the tables."

"Sure we can!" cried several.

"So limber up, Sam," the manager went on, "and have your arm in good shape."

"It will be in bad shape if I get run down by any more amateur cyclists," sneered Sam as he looked meaningfully at Joe, but no one made any further reference to the recent collision.

At practice the next day Joe took his place with the regular Silver Star team, and he showed up well in the impromptu contest against the scrubs. He made several good catches, and though his stick work might have been improved, still it was pretty good, for the scrub pitcher was not to be despised.

"I guess you'll do," complimented Darrell, at the close of the contest. "Keep it up, don't get rattled, and you'll be all right. I can see you've played before."

"I guess I've got lots to learn yet," admitted Joe cheerfully.

"Oh, we all have," assented the manager with a laugh.

On the Saturday of the game with the Red Stockings, Joe was up early. He had overhauled his old uniform and gotten Clara to put a few needed stitches in it. He had it out on the clothes line in the back yard, beating some of the dust and dirt from it to freshen it up, when Tom hailed him from over the fence.

"I say, Joe, what sort of a shirt have you got?"

"Same one I used on the Bentville Boosters; that was the name of our nine."

"I see. A good name all right, but it will look funny to see that in among the uniforms of the Silver Stars. Your stockings and pants will do, but the shirt——" and Tom paused suggestively.

"That's so," admitted Joe. "I didn't think about that. It's a different color from yours, and I haven't time to get another."

"Never mind!" called Tom. "I tell you what you can do. Use my shirt. It's the regular Star one, with the name on."

"Won't you want it?"

"No, I don't think I'm going to get a chance to play. Darrell will probably hold down first all through the game. If I have to go in I can borrow some other fellow's. But I want you to look right from the start."

"Thanks," called Joe as Tom disappeared in the house to get his shirt. It fitted Joe well, and he arranged to get his own in time for the next game.

"Say, there's a big crowd here all right!" exclaimed Joe, as he and Tom neared the enclosed diamond that afternoon, and saw the stands well filled.

"Yes, so much the better. The Red Stockings always draw well. I hope we beat. Do your prettiest."

"Sure I will. There's Sam warming up."

"Yes, I hope he doesn't go up in the air. Better hurry up and get in practice."

Joe ran out on the diamond, which was thronged with the home team and visiting players. Balls were being caught and batted about, and the new player was soon doing his share.

"Now keep cool," Darrell advised him, "and above all don't have a row with Sam. I can't understand why he has such a grudge against you, but he has and there's no use letting it be known any more than it is."

"I won't do or say anything if he doesn't," promised Joe. "But I'm not going to let him knock me down and then wipe his feet on me."

"Of course not. I'll see that he's decent, anyhow. Well, I guess it's time we

started. I see they have some new players. Maybe we won't beat them as easily as I hoped."

The practice balls were called in, players were selecting their sticks, the batting order had been decided on, and the final arrangements made.

"Play ball!" called the umpire, and the Silver Stars took the field. Joe walked out to centre. His heart was beating high. It was his first chance to show what he could do in a match game with his new team and he wanted to make good. But oh! how he longed to be in the pitching box occupied by Sam Morton!

"Play ball!" called the umpire again, and Sam, "winding up," let fly a swift white ball toward the expectant batter.

"Strike one!" yelled the young umpire, as the ball landed with a resounding thud in Bart Ferguson's big mitt.

Chapter 10: A Tight Contest

"That's the stuff!" called several in the crowd.

"Send back the Reds with a whitewash brush," added another enthusiast.

"I guess Sam's in form to-day," remarked Tom Davis to Rodney Burke near whom he sat. Tom was not playing, for Darrell was holding down the initial bag.

"Wait a bit and see what happens along about the seventh inning," said Rodney. "Sam generally falls down then if he's going to."

"Well, I hope he doesn't, that's all," said Tom, and then he gave all his attention to watching the game.

"Ball one," was the next decision of the umpire.

"Aw what's the matter with you?" cried Sam, starting toward home where Bart stood holding the ball. "That clipped the plate as good as any one would want. You'd better get a pair of glasses, Kern. You can't see straight."

"I can see as well as you!" retorted Frank Kern, the umpire.

"It wasn't anywhere near over the plate," retorted Jack King, the batter.

"Aw, you don't know a good ball when you get one," snapped Sam. "I guess——"

"That'll do now!" called Darrell sharply from first. "This isn't a kid game. Play ball. Don't be always kicking, Sam."

"Who is always kicking?" demanded the pitcher, and it was evident to all that he was in unusually bad temper.

"I hope it isn't on my account," thought Joe who, from his position in deep centre, was waiting for anything that might come his way. He had been told to play far out, for King was known as a heavy hitter.

Sam received the ball from Bart with a scowl and wound up for the next delivery. Sam was a natural pitcher. That is, he had good control, as a rule, and he made his shoulder and back do most of the work of the pitching arm, as all professionals do. Still his unpleasant temper often made his efforts go to waste.

"Strike two!" called the umpire this time, and there was no doubt about it for King had swung viciously at the ball. But Sam had sent in a puzzling little drop, and the knowledge that he had fooled a good batter brought a smile to his otherwise scowling face.

"Here's where I get you!" he predicted.

But alas for his hopes! The bat met the ball squarely and Sam had made the mistake of sending a fast ball to a heavy hitter enabling King to knock out a pretty three bagger. Far back as Joe had stationed himself he was not far enough and he had to turn and run after the horsehide. And how he did run! He was thinking desperately what would happen if he missed it! He made up his mind that he would not, yet it was not within the power of any one to get to the spot before the ball fell.

Joe felt it graze the tips of his fingers as it rushed downward but that was all. He heard himself groan involuntarily in anguish as the ball hit the ground with a thud. He lost no time in idle regrets however, but picked it up and made a throw to third in time to hold King there, for the doughty player had a notion of continuing on home.

"Good try old man!" yelled some spectators on the benches nearest Joe. He felt that his effort was somewhat appreciated but he wondered what Darrell would think of it. Sam was scowling again, whether at Joe's perfectly natural miss, or the fact that he was hit for three bases was impossible to guess.

"Try for the next one," called Darrell cheerfully, and Sam did with such success that Bigney, who was second up for the Red Stockings, only pounded out a little drizzler that Sam quickly gathered in and threw to first. King was still held on third. Smart fanned out, and then came Steel, who, after knocking a couple of fouls, was fooled on a little in-shoot which made three out, King dying on third and the side being retired with no runs.

"Oh, not so bad," said Sam as he walked in to the bench.

"I guess we've got their number all right," assented Darrell. He saw Joe coming in from centre and the manager stopped to speak to him.

"Nobody could have gotten that ball," he said, for he realized that the new player might blame himself unjustly. "I didn't think King had it in him, or I'd have told you to play out to the limit. He won't get you that way again."

"I guess not!" exclaimed Joe heartily.

The make up and batting order of the Silver Stars was the same as in the game with the Resolutes save that Joe was in Jed McGraw's place, and this brought him second to the bat. Potter was up first and managed to get a single.

"Now, bring him in," commanded Darrell with a smile at Joe, as the latter picked out a bat. He was very nervous, as any lad would have been, playing his first game with a new team. He did want to make good!

"I'll try," he said simply.

Painter, the Red Stocking pitcher, had no phenomenal speed and his curves could not be depended on to break at the right places. Still he was a good "bluffer" and he made many a batter think that he was getting a very swift ball. Often it would look as though it was going to hit the man at the plate and he would instinctively step back, disconcerting his own aim.

Joe let the first ball pass, and was somewhat surprised to have a strike called on him. But he did not kick, for, as a matter of fact, the horsehide had clipped the plate.

"I'll get the next one," thought Joe grimly. Then Painter worked his usual trick, of throwing a ball close in, and Joe bent his body like a bow.

"Strike two!" yelled the umpire and Joe felt a flash of anger. But he said nothing, and when the next ball came he swung viciously at it. He heard the heart-stirring ping! and, dropping his bat, he legged it for first as Potter darted to second.

But Joe had not hit the ball nearly as hard as he thought he had, and the result was that the shortstop gathered it in, and, by a quick throw to first, caught our hero there.

"Quick, to second!" yelled the coacher, but Potter dropped and slid, being counted safe.

"One down, only two more!" yelled Murphy, captain and catcher of the "Reds," as they were called for short.

Joe felt his face burning with shame as he walked back to the bench.

"Humph! I thought we were going to see some wonders!" murmured Sam Morton sarcastically.

"It's all right, Matson—it was an even chance, and you found the ball," said

Darrell quickly. He knew the danger of a new player becoming discouraged.

"Thanks," said Joe quietly.

Lantry got a single which sent Potter to third, but the next two men struck out and with two men left on bases the Silver Stars had to take the field again with only a goose egg to their credit.

The game ran along to the ending of the third inning with neither side getting a run. Each team made some scattering hits but the fielding was evenly good, and no one crossed the home plate. Joe made one fine catch in the beginning of the third and received a round of applause that did his heart good.

Sam was pitching pretty good ball, occasionally being found for a two bagger, but any short-comings in this line were more than made up in the support he received from his mates.

"It's going to be a tighter game than I thought it was," murmured Darrell, at the close of the fourth inning, when his side had managed to get in one run to tie the tally which the Reds had secured. "They've got a better team than I gave them credit for."

"You don't think they're going to beat us, do you?" asked Sam anxiously.

"I—well—I hope not," was the hesitating answer.

"Does that mean you don't think I'm doing all I ought to?" demanded the pitcher defiantly.

"Of course not. I know you wouldn't throw the game. Only I wish we could strike more of them out," and the manager looked anxiously over the field as his players were stationing themselves.

"Wait and see what I do this inning," invited Sam. "Perhaps you want that new fellow to go in the box in my place." His voice was sneering now.

"Who, Joe Matson?" asked Darrell quickly.

"That's who I mean," replied Sam surlily.

"Don't be foolish," was the manager's quiet answer. "You know he hasn't had any experience in the box—or at least enough to play on our team, though I think he'll make a good fielder. Now do your prettiest Sam. You can, you know."

"All right," assented the pitcher, and once more the game was underway.

The fifth inning was productive of one run for the Silver Stars and this after they had retired their rivals hitless, for Sam did some excellent pitching. There was a howl of delight as the first tally came in, making the score two to one in favor of our friends. And there was none out.

"Now we ought to walk away from them," called Darrell to his players. Joe came up to bat and to his delight he got a single. He was advanced to second when the next player connected with the ball, and then followed some see-sawing on the part of the pitcher and the second baseman, in an endeavor to catch Joe napping.

Once our hero thought he saw a good chance to steal third and he was about to take it when something warned him to come back. He did, and only just in time, for the pitcher threw to second. It was a close shave.

Joe slid head foremost and as his fingers touched the bag the second baseman leaped up in the air to catch the ball which the pitcher had wildly thrown high.

When the baseman came down, making a wild effort to touch Joe, the iron cleat of one shoe caught the little finger of Joe's left hand and cut it cruelly.

The plucky centre fielder tried to stifle the groan of anguish that rose to his lips, but it was impossible. The baseman was aware of the accident.

Dropping the ball he knelt over Joe.

"I'm mighty sorry, old man!" he exclaimed. "Are you hurt much?"

"No—no. I—I guess not," murmured Joe, and then all got black before his eyes, and there was a curious roaring in his ears.

Chapter 11: Joe's Run

"Water here! Bring some water!" yelled Smart, who was holding down second base for the Reds. "He's fainted I guess."

There was a rush of players toward Joe, and Darrell was the first to reach him.

"What's the matter, old man?" he asked sympathetically.

"I'm afraid I spiked him," answered Smart, ruefully. "I jumped for the ball, and came down on his hand I guess."

"Too bad," murmured Darrell.

They turned Joe over, for he was lying on his face, and saw his left hand covered with blood.

"Where's that first-aid kit?" called Tom Davis, who had rushed on the field on seeing his friend hurt.

"Here it is," answered Rodney Burke, who acted as the amateur surgeon on the few times his services had been required. "I'll bandage it up. Had we better get a

doctor?"

Meanwhile some water had been sprinkled in Joe's face and some forced between his lips. He opened his eyes as the others were washing the blood from his hand.

"I—I'm all right," he murmured, as he strove to rise.

"Now that's all right—you just lie still," commanded Darrell. "Look at it Rod, and see how bad it is."

Fortunately the wound was not as serious as had at first seemed and when cleansed of dirt and blood it was seen to be a long cut, lengthwise of the finger.

"I'll have that done up in a jiffy," remarked Rodney, who was not a little proud of his skill. His father was a physician, and had shown the son how to make simple bandages. The wound was cleansed with an antiseptic solution and wrapped in the long narrow strips of bandage cloth. Joe got to his feet while this was being done, and, after a little water containing aromatic spirits of ammonia had been given to him, he declared that he was all right.

"Are you sure?" asked Darrell anxiously.

"Sure, I'll bring in a run yet if some one knocks the ball far enough," said Joe with a smile, though it was rather a feeble one.

"Nonsense, you can't run after that," exclaimed Murphy, the Red captain. "Give him a man," he added generously to his rival. "We don't care."

"I think I had better send Newton down to run for you," said Captain Rankin.

"But I'm going to play," insisted Joe.

"Yes, next inning," he was assured, and the game went on.

However, even the substitution of a runner in Joe's place availed nothing, as the side was soon afterward retired with the men expiring on bases, and the one run was all the Silver Stars could gather in. Still that made the score two to one in their favor.

There was a big surprise in the next inning. The Reds came to bat full of confidence, and the first man up rapped out as pretty a three bagger as had been pulled off that day. It went to deep right field, for which Joe was thankful, as even with his finger protected by a bandage and a heavy glove on his hand, he felt that he would wince at catching a swift ball, and might possibly muff it. That was what the right fielder did, though he managed to pick it up quickly enough to prevent the player from going on in to home.

Whether the fact of being hit for a long poke made Sam lose his temper, or the

knowledge that part of his support consisted of a wounded player made him nervous, was not manifest, but the fact remains that the pitcher "went up in the air" after that. He gave one man his base on balls, and when the next player came up, and rapped out a two bagger the man at third went on in, and there was a man holding down third while one on second nearly made the bases full.

"Easy now," cautioned Darrell to Sam. "Hold 'em down."

"Um!" grunted Sam, and what he meant by it might be imagined, but he did strike out the next two men. Then came a single which resulted in a tally being made, being the second run of the inning. Sam shut his teeth grimly. There were now two out and two men on bases and Sam felt his nerve leaving him. But by a strong effort he braced himself, and did the trick to the next man, stopping the winning streak of the Reds just in time.

"Three to two against us," murmured Darrell as he looked at the score board when he and his mates came in for their turn at the bat. "That isn't going as I'd like to see it. Say, fellows, we've got to knuckle down if we want to pull this game out of the fire."

"That's what," murmured George Rankin, and, perhaps involuntarily, he glanced at Sam.

"Oh, I know what you fellows mean without you saying so!" snapped the pitcher. "I wish you'd keep your remarks to yourselves. I can pitch all right."

"No one said you couldn't," declared Darrell gently.

But it was very little that the Silver Stars could accomplish. Two men went down to inglorious defeat. The third knocked a nice single but died on first when the Red pitcher with seeming ease struck out the fourth batter. And it was not due so much that the visiting boxman had speed or curves, as to the fact that he could fool the batters with easy balls.

"We seem to have struck a hoodoo," said Darrell in despairing tones as they took the field again. "Sam, our only hope is in you. Not a run for us this inning and they got two."

"They won't get any more!" declared Sam savagely.

He made good his boast, for not a man got beyond second, and of those who performed this feat there was but one. A big circle went up in the Red's frame for the ending of the first half of the seventh inning.

But the Silver Stars fared no better, and for the next inning the result was the same, neither side being able to score. The tally was three runs to two in favor of the visitors when the ninth inning opened.

The Silver Stars didn't like to think of that inning afterward. There were numerous errors, wild throws and muffs. Joe let a ball slip through his fingers when by holding it he might have prevented a run, but it happened to hit on the cut place, and the agony was such that he let out an exclamation of pain.

But he was not the only one who sinned. Sam was "rotten," to quote Tom Davis, and "issued a number of passes." One man got to first by virtue of being hit and when the inning was over there were three runs in the Red's box.

"Six to two against us," murmured Darrell. "It looks bad, fellows—it looks bad."

Joe was first up to the bat.

"Do you think you can hit?" asked the captain anxiously.

"Oh, yes. I can hold my little finger away from the bat and I'll be all right."

"Then hit for all you're worth," begged Darrell. "We need all we can get."

Joe clenched his teeth grimly and made up his mind he would not be fooled as he had been several times before.

The Red pitcher was smiling in a tantalizing way and Joe felt himself almost hating him for it.

"I'm going to hit you! I'm going to hit you!" he found himself murmuring over and over again in his mind.

And hit Joe did. The first delivery was a ball, but the second Joe knew was just where he wanted it. With all his force he swung at it and as he sped away toward first, with all the power of his legs he saw the horsehide sailing on a clean hit in a long, low drive over the centre fielder's head.

Joe heard the ball strike the farther fence and a wild hope came into his heart that he might make a home run.

"I'm going to do it! I'm going to do it!" he whispered to himself as he turned first and sped like the wind for second base. Could he beat the ball in? That was what he was asking himself. That was what hundreds of frantic fans were asking themselves.

Chapter 12: Discontent

"Leg it, Joe! Leg it!"

"Keep on! Keep on!"

"He can't get you in time!"

"A home run! A homer, old man!"

"Keep a-going! Keep a-going!"

These and other frantic appeals and bits of advice were hurled at Joe as he dashed madly on. He had a glimpse of the centre fielder racing madly after the ball, and then he felt for the first time that he really had a chance to make a home run. Still he knew that the ball travels fast when once thrown, and it might be relayed in, for he saw the second baseman running back to assist the centre fielder.

"But I'm going to beat it!" panted Joe to himself.

The grandstand and bleachers were now a mass of yelling excited spectators. There was a good attendance at the game, many women and girls being present, and Joe could hear their shrill voices mingling with the hoarser shouts of the men and boys.

"Keep on! Keep on!" he heard yelled encouragingly at him.

"That's the stuff, old man!" shouted Darrell, who was coaching at the third base line.

"Shall I go in?" cried Joe as he turned the last bag.

Darrell took a swift glance toward the field. He saw what Joe could not. The centre fielder instead of relaying in the ball by the second baseman (for the throw was too far for him), had attempted to get it to third alone. Darrell knew it would fall short.

"Yes! Yes!" he howled. "Go on in, Joe! Go on in!"

And Joe went.

Just as the manager had anticipated, the ball fell short, and the pitcher who had run down to cover second had to run out of the diamond to get it. It was an error in judgment, and helped Joe to make his sensational run.

He was well on his way home now, but the pitcher had the ball and was throwing it to the catcher.

"Slide, Joe! Slide!" yelled Darrell above the wild tumult of the other players and the spectators.

Joe kept on until he knew a slide would be effective and then, dropping like a shot, he fairly tore through the dust, feet first, toward home plate. His shoes covered it as the ball came with a thud into the outstretched hands of the catcher.

"Safe!" yelled the umpire, and there was no questioning his decision.

"Good play!" yelled the crowd.

"That's the stuff, old man!" exclaimed Darrell, rushing up and clapping Joe on the back.

"A few more like that and the game will either go ten innings or we'll have it in the ice-box for ourselves," commented Captain Rankin gleefully.

But the hopes of the Silver Stars were doomed to disappointment. Try as the succeeding men did to connect with the ball, the best that could be knocked out was a single, and that was not effective, for the man who did it was caught attempting to steal second and two others were struck out.

That ended the game, Joe's solitary run being the only one tallied up, and the final score was three to six in favor of the Red Stockings.

"Three cheers for the Silver Stars!" called the captain of the successful nine and they were given with right good feeling.

"Three cheers for the Red Stockings," responded Darrell. "They were too much for us," and the cheers of the losers were none less hearty than those of their rivals.

"And three cheers for the fellow who made the home run!" added a Red Stocking player, and our hero could not help blushing as he was thus honored.

"It was all to the pepper-castor, old man," complimented Darrell. "We didn't put up a very good game, but you sort of stand out among the other Stars."

"And I suppose the rest of us did rotten!" snarled Sam Morton as he walked past.

"Well, to be frank, I think we all did," spoke Darrell. "I'm not saying that Joe didn't make any errors, for he did. But he made the only home run of the game, and that's a lot."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," sneered the disgruntled pitcher. "You'll be blaming me next for the loss of the game."

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Darrell quickly. "I think we've all got to bear our share of the defeat. We ought to have played better, and we've got to, if we don't want to be at the tail end of the county league."

"And that means that I've got to do better pitching, I suppose?" sneered Sam.

"It means we've all got to do better work," put in Captain Rankin. "You along with the rest of us, Sam. You know you were pretty well batted to-day."

"Any fellow is likely to be swatted once in a while. Look at some of the professionals."

"I'm not saying they're not," admitted the captain. "What I do say is that we've all got to perk up. We've got to take a brace, and I'm not sparing myself. We're not doing well."

"No, that's right," admitted several other players. In fact there was a general feeling of discontent manifested, and it was very noticeable. Darrell Blackney was aware of it, and he hoped it would not spread, for nothing is so sure to make a team slump as discontent or dissatisfaction.

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed a girl's voice, and he turned to see his sister walking toward him over the field. "That was a fine run you made." She had two other girls with her and Joe, who was a bit bashful, turned to execute a retreat.

"I believe you never met my brother," went on Clara, and there was a trace of pride in her tone. "Miss Mabel Davis," said Clara, presenting her to Joe, "and Miss Helen Rutherford."

"I've heard my sister speak of you," murmured the young centre fielder.

"And I've heard my brother speak of you," said Mabel, and Joe was conscious that he was blushing.

"I've got to wash up now," he said, not knowing what to talk about when two pretty girls, to say nothing of his own sister, were staring at him.

"Does your hand hurt you much?" asked Mabel.

"No—it's only a scratch," said Joe, not with a strict regard for the truth.

"Oh, I thought I'd faint when I saw you lying there so still," spoke Clara with a little shudder.

"So did I," added Helen, and then Joe made his escape before they could "fuss" over him any more.

There was considerable talk going on in the dressing room when Joe entered. He could hear the voice of Sam Morton raised in high and seemingly angry tones.

"Well, I'm not going to stand for it!" the pitcher said.

"Stand for what?" asked Darrell in surprise.

"Being accused of the cause for the loss of this game!"

"No one accuses you," put in the captain.

"You might as well say it as look it," retorted Sam. "I tell you I won't stand for it. Just because that new fellow made a home run you're all up in the air about him, and for all the hard work I do, what do I get for it? Eh? Nothing, that's what!"

"Now, look here," said Darrell soothingly, "you know you're talking foolishly,

Sam."

"I am not!" cried the pitcher petulantly. "Either Joe Matson leaves the team or I do, and you can have my resignation any time you want it!"

Chapter 13: Scientific Practice

There was a period of silence following Sam's offer of his resignation, and no one seemed to know just what to say. Several of the lads glanced at Joe, as if expecting him to say something in his own defense. In fact the young centre fielder was about to speak but he did not get the chance, for Sam exclaimed again:

"Well, do you want my resignation, Darrell?"

"You know I don't!" declared the manager.

"Then things have got to be changed!"

"Look here!" burst out Darrell. "I've stood about all I'm going to from you, Sam Morton. There has got to be a change in this team."

"That's just what I'm giving you a chance to make," the pitcher fairly sneered. "You can fill my place any time you like."

"But I'm not going to," and though Darrell spoke pleasantly there was a sternness in his words. "Fellows, it's like this," he went on. "The Silver Stars are a good team and you know it. So does every one in this town, but the last two games we've played in hard luck, and——"

"Do you mean to say it was my pitching?" demanded Sam.

"No more than it was the way we all played. As I said, we've got to take a brace. I don't know what's gotten into you, Sam, to say you'll resign if Joe Matson plays. What have you against him?"

"Well, I hate to see a newcomer made so much of. Here we fellows have worked hard all season, and——"

"And you're going to work hard the rest of the season!" exclaimed Darrell. "Let me tell you that! I'm not going to hear any more talk of resignations, and this bickering has got to stop. Otherwise we'll be the laughing stock of the county. You all played pretty well to-day, but you all need to do better."

"All but Matson; I suppose he's the star," sneered Sam.

"Look here," burst out Joe, unable to stand the taunts of the pitcher any longer, "if you think——"

"Now, go easy," advised Darrell with a smile. "I'm giving this little lecture. I give Matson due credit for one of the three runs we got," he went on, "but that's not saying that he didn't make errors. We all did.

"Oh, fellows!" he pleaded and they could see that he was very much in earnest, "let's get together and wallop every nine we play against from now on! Take a brace. Forget all this feeling and get together. Matson and Morton, I want you to shake hands, will you?"

"I'm willing," assented Joe eagerly, advancing toward Sam.

The latter hesitated a moment and then, feeling the eyes of all in the dressing room on him, he mumbled:

"Well, as long as you don't think he's the star of the Stars, I'll shake. Maybe I was a bit hasty," he went on, and this was a great deal for Sam Morton to admit. He and Joe shook hands, though it cannot be said that there was any warmth on the part of the pitcher. Still it was better than open enmity, though Joe wondered if Sam would be really friendly.

"That's better," commented the manager with something like a sigh of relief.

"And don't let this go any further," suggested the captain. "We don't want it known that there came near being a break in the Stars. Now get together, fellows. Show up at practice strong next time, and we'll win our next game!"

"That's the way to talk!" cried Tom Davis, and the crisis was passed—for a time.

And, to the delight of Joe, he found that he had made many new friends, chiefly because of his sensational run. The members of the team, of course, crowded around him congratulating him, and asking him how he did it. But, in addition, there now flocked into the dressing room a crowd of lads who had witnessed the game. Some of them were high school pupils who knew Joe, at least by sight, but they now came up and spoke to him. Other town lads did the same thing.

"Gee! It's great to be popular!" exclaimed Tom, with a mock sigh. "Why wasn't I born a home-run hitter instead of good looking, I wonder?"

"Get out!" laughed Joe. "Don't make me get a swelled head."

"No danger, I guess," retorted Tom.

Darrell and the captain strolled up to Joe, who had finished dressing.

"Well, that's over, for a while," said Darrell in a low voice, evidently referring to the unpleasant little incident. "I want to ask you to do some practicing, Matson. You need to try throwing a bit, for it's a long heave in from centre field and, to be frank, you aren't any too good at it."

"I'll practice every day," exclaimed our hero eagerly.

"And I'll coach him," added Tom.

"Get out, you lobster, you need coaching yourself," said the captain with a laugh. "You'll get rusty if Darrell doesn't get off first and give you a chance."

"I'll do it more often now," said the manager. "I want to be more on the coaching line. Two wallops in two weeks is more than the Stars can stand."

"Who do we play next week?" asked Tom.

"The Denville Whizzers, but I don't imagine we'll have much trouble with them," said the manager. "However, it won't do to take any chances. Practice hard, fellows," and with that he left the dressing room.

Sam Morton had gone out some time before and Joe and Tom soon followed. As they strolled down the street toward their homes Tom said:

"Say Joe, I was in earnest in saying I'd coach you. I believe you do need practice in throwing, and if you haven't given up the idea of pitching some day——"

"I'll never give up the idea until I'm knocked out of the box," declared Joe.

"Good! Then I'll help coach you. I was going to say it wasn't much fun practicing alone, and as a matter of fact it doesn't do much good."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've been reading up about baseball lately. I got a book on pitching, and——"

"Say, will you lend it to me?" asked Joe eagerly. "Or tell me where I can buy one?"

"Sure I will. I was going to say that it has articles in it by star professional pitchers and a lot of them agree that it isn't much use just to go out and throw a ball at a spot on the backstop or the fence."

"What's the best way then?" asked Joe, who had supposed from his limited knowledge that to practice at hitting a certain spot with the ball was about the best he could do.

"Why, they say the best is to get something like a home plate—a flat stone say—and pitch over it with some one to catch for you."

"I suppose that would be a good way," began Joe doubtfully, "but who's going to catch for me?"

"I am!" exclaimed Tom quickly. "I said just now that I'd coach you. I'll do more than that, I'll catch for you. And the book I spoke of has other tricks of practice,

so a fellow can get good control of a ball. That's the thing pitchers need it says—control. Say, we'll have some fun, you and I, down in a vacant lot practicing. When can you come?"

"How about Monday afternoon?"

"Suits me first rate."

"All right, we'll make it then, and we'll get in some scientific practice for you. Maybe after all, you'll pitch in Sam's place before the season is over."

"I wouldn't want to do it, if it's going to make a row in the team."

"Oh, don't let that worry you. Lots of the fellows don't like Sam any too well. They'd as soon have some one else in the box if he could deliver the goods. Well, so long; see you Monday, if not before."

"I guess I'm glad dad moved to Riverside after all," mused Joe as he walked toward home. "I was afraid I wouldn't like it at first, but now I'm on the team it's all right. I hope dad doesn't have any business troubles though. I wonder what is wrong for I'm sure something is. I hope it doesn't prevent me from going to boarding school next year," and with this reflection Joe went in the house.

Chapter 14: A Kettle Of Apple Sauce

"Well, Joe, are you all ready?" It was Tom Davis, and he had called at Joe's house on his way from school, as Tom had to remain in physics class to finish an experiment, and Joe had gone on ahead.

"I sure am, Tom. Where are we going to practice? Over on the fairgrounds?"

"No, that's too far. We'll go down in the vacant lots back of Mrs. Peterkin's house. There's a high fence back of her house and that will be a good backstop, in case I can't hold your hot ones."

"Oh, I guess you can all right," replied Joe with a laugh, "though I wish I did have lots of speed."

"Say now, don't make that mistake," said Tom earnestly, as Joe came out to join him, having picked up some old balls and a pitcher's glove.

"What mistake?"

"Trying for speed before you have control. I saw an article about that in the pitching book last night. I brought it along. Here it is," and both boys looked eagerly over the book as they walked along.

As Tom had said, some of the best authorities on pitching did advocate the

trying for control before a prospective boxman endeavored to get either speed or curves.

"The thing seems to be," remarked Joe, "to get a ball just where you want it, ten times out of ten if you can, and then when you can do that, try for the in and out shoots and the drop."

"That's it," agreed Tom. "Are you any good at throwing stones?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Well, one fellow says that the lad who can throw a stone straight can generally throw a ball straight. We'll have a contest when we get down to the lots. Nobody will see us there."

"I hope not," remarked Joe. "I don't want to be laughed at the way I was when Sam caught me down at the fairgrounds. I guess he thought I was trying for his place then, and that's what made him mad."

The two friends were soon down behind the high board fence that marked the boundaries of the Peterkin property. It was rather a large place—the Peterkin one—and was occupied by an aged couple. Mrs. Alvirah Peterkin was quite a housewife, always engaged in some kitchen or other household duties, while Ebenezer, her husband "puttered" around the garden, as the folks of Riverside expressed it.

"Well, I guess we're all ready," remarked Tom, when he had picked out a large flat stone to represent home plate. He took his position behind it, with his back to the fence, so that if any balls got by him they would hit the barrier and bound back.

Joe began to pitch, endeavoring to bear in mind what the book had said about getting the balls where he wanted them.

"That was pretty far out from the plate," called Tom dubiously, after one effort on the part of his chum.

"I know it was. Here's a better one."

"Good! That's the stuff. It was a strike all right—right over the middle. Keep it up."

For a time Joe kept this up, pitching at moderate speed, and then the temptation to "cut loose" could not be resisted. He "wound up" as he had seen professional pitchers do and let the ball go. With considerable force it went right through Tom's hands and crashed up against the fence with a resounding bang. It was the first ball Tom had let get past him.

"That was a hot one all right!" the catcher called, "but it was away out."

"All right, I'll slow down again," said Joe. He was a little disappointed that he could not combine speed and accuracy.

The boys were about to resume their practice when a face, fringed with a shock of white hair on top, and a little ring of whiskers encircling it below, was raised over the edge of the fence, and a mild voice demanded:

"What you boys up to now—tryin' to knock down my fence?"

"Oh, hello, Mr. Peterkin," called Tom. "We're just playing baseball—that's all."

"Where's the rest of ye?" the old man wanted to know.

"This is all there are of us," replied Tom, waving his hand toward Joe.

"Humph! Fust time I ever heard of two boys playin' a ball game all by themselves," commented the aged man with a chuckle. "But I s'pose it's one of them new-fangled kind. Land sakes, what th' world a-comin' t' anyhow, I'd like t' know? Wa'al, keep on, only don't knock any boards offen my fence," he stipulated as he resumed the making of his garden.

The boys laughingly promised and resumed their practice. Tom was a good catcher and he had an accurate eye. He did not hesitate to tell Joe when the balls were bad and he was a severe critic, for he had taken an honest liking to the newcomer, and wanted to see him succeed.

"Just try for control," was the gist of his advice. "The rest if it will take care of itself."

"Don't you want to pitch and let me catch for you?" asked Joe after a bit, fearing that he was somewhat selfish.

"No, I don't specially need any practice at throwing," said Tom. "First is my position. I like it better than any other, and catching is the best practice I can have for that. Keep it up."

So Joe kept on, using moderate speed after the warning of Mr. Peterkin, so that no more balls struck the fence. But then again came the almost irresistible desire to put on "steam," and indulging in this Joe sent in another "hot one."

Almost the instant it left his hand Joe realized that he had lost control of the ball and that it was going wild. He instinctively reached out to pull it back, but it was too late.

"Grab it!" he yelled to Tom.

The plucky little first baseman made a magnificent jump up in the air, but the ball merely grazed the tip of his up-stretched glove. Then it went on over the fence at undiminished speed. An instant later there was the cry of alarm.

"Who did that?" demanded the voice—a voice full of anger. "Who threw that ball? Oh! Oh! Of all things! I demand to know who did it?"

Joe and Tom were silent—looking blankly one at the other. Up over the fence rose the mild and bewhiskered face of Mr. Peterkin.

"Boys," asked the aged man gently. "Did anything happen? It sounds like it to me."

"I—I threw the ball over the fence," admitted Joe.

"Hum! Then I'm afraid something did happen," went on Mr. Peterkin still more gently. "Yes, I'm sure of it," he added as the sound of some one coming down the garden path could be heard. "Here comes Alvirah. Something has happened. Do—do you want to run?" he asked, for rumor had it that Mrs. Peterkin was possessed of no gentle temper and Mr. Peterkin—well, he was a very mild-mannered man, every one knew that. "Do you want to run?" he asked again.

"No," said Tom.

"Of course not," added Joe. "If we broke a window we'll pay for it—I'll pay for it," he corrected himself, for he had thrown the ball.

Mrs. Peterkin advanced to where her husband was working in the garden. The boys could not see the lady but they could hear her.

"You didn't throw that ball, did you, Ebenezer?" she asked. "If you did—at your age—cutting up such foolish tricks as playing baseball—I—I'll——"

"No, Alvirah, I didn't do it, of course not," Mr. Peterkin hastened to say. "It was a couple of boys. Tom Davis and a friend of his. They were playing ball back of the fence and——"

"And they've run off now, I'll venture!" exclaimed the rasping voice of Mrs. Peterkin.

"No—no, I don't think so, Alvirah," said Mr. Peterkin mildly. "I—I rather think they're there yet. I asked 'em if they didn't want to run and——"

"You—asked them—if—they—didn't—want—to—run?" gasped Mrs. Peterkin, as if unable to believe his words. "Why, the very—idea!"

"Oh, I knew they'd pay for any damage they did," said her husband quickly, "and I—er—I sort of thought—well, anyhow they're over there," and he pointed to the fence.

"Let me see them! Let me talk to them!" demanded Mrs. Peterkin.

"Stand on that soap box an' ye kin see over the fence," said Mr. Peterkin. "But look out. The bottom is sort of soft an' ye may——"

He did not finish his sentence. The very accident he feared had happened. Mrs. Peterkin, being a large and heavy woman, had stepped in the middle of the box. The bottom boards, being old, had given way and there she was—stuck with both feet in the soap box.

“Ebenezer!” she cried. “Help me! Don’t you know any better than to stand there staring at me? Haven’t you got any senses?”

“Of course I’ll help you, Alvira,” he said. “I rather thought you’d go through that box.”

“Then you’d no business to let me use it!” she snapped.

“It allers held me up when I wanted to look over the fence,” he said mildly. “But then of course I never stepped in the middle of it,” he added as he helped his wife pull aside the broken boards so she could step out. “I kept on the edges.”

“Have those boys gone?” she demanded when free.

“I don’t think so. I’ll look,” he volunteered as he turned the soap box up on edge and peered over the fence. “No, they’re here yet,” he answered as he saw Joe and Tom standing there, trying their best not to laugh. “Was you wantin’ to speak with ’em, Alvira?”

“Speak with them! Of course I do!” she cried. “Tell them to come around to the side gate. I’ll speak to them,” and she drew herself up like an angry hen.

“Did—did they smash a window?” asked Mr. Peterkin.

“Smash a window? I only wish it was no worse than that!” cried his wife. “They threw their nasty baseball into a kettle of apple sauce that was stewing on the stove, and the sauce splashed all over my clean kitchen. Tell them to come around. I’ll speak to them!”

“I—I guess you’d better come in, boys,” said Mr. Peterkin softly, as he delivered the message over the fence. Then he added—but to himself—“Maybe you might better have run while you had the chance.”

“We’re in for it I guess,” murmured Tom, as he and Joe went around to the side gate.

Chapter 15: Joe Overhears Something

“Are you the boys who threw the baseball through my kitchen window into my kettle of apple sauce?” demanded Mrs. Peterkin, as she confronted the two culprits.

"I threw it," admitted Joe.

"But we didn't know it went into the apple sauce," added Tom.

"Nor through the window," spoke Joe for want of something better to say. "It was a wild throw."

"Humph!" exclaimed the irate lady. "I don't know what kind of a throw it was but I know I was wild when I saw my kitchen. I never saw such a sight in all my born days—never! You come and look at it."

"If—if you please I'd rather not," said Joe quickly. "I'll pay you whatever damages you say, but I—I—"

"I just want you to see that kitchen!" insisted Mrs. Peterkin. "It's surprising how mischievous boys can be when they try."

"But we didn't try," put in Tom. "This was an accident."

"Come and see my kitchen!" repeated Mrs. Peterkin firmly and she seemed capable of taking them each by an ear and leading them in.

"You—you'd better go," advised Mr. Peterkin gently.

So they went, and truly the sight that met their eyes showed them that Mrs. Peterkin had some excuse for being angry. On the stove there had been cooking a large kettle of sauce made from early apples. The window near the stove had been left open and through the casement the ball, thrown with all Joe's strength, had flown, landing fairly into the middle of the soft sauce.

The result may easily be imagined. It splattered all over the floor, half way up on the side walls, and there were even spots of the sauce on the ceiling. The top of the stove was covered with it, and as the lids were hot they had burned the sugar to charcoal, while the kitchen was filled with smoke and fumes.

"There!" cried Mrs. Peterkin, as she waved her hand at the scene of ruin. "Did you ever see such a kitchen as that? And it was clean scrubbed only this morning! Did you ever see anything like that? Tell me!"

Joe and Tom were both forced to murmur that they had never beheld such a sight before. And they added with equal but unexpressed truth that they hoped they never would again.

"I'm willing to pay for the damage," said Joe once more, and his hand went toward his pocket. "It was an accident."

"Maybe it was," sniffed Mrs. Peterkin. "I won't say that it wasn't, but that won't clean my kitchen."

Joe caught at these words.

"I'm willing to help you clean up!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I often help at home when my mother is sick. Let me do it, and I'll pay for the apple sauce I spoiled."

"I'll help," put in Tom eagerly.

"Who is your mother?" asked Mrs. Peterkin, looking at Joe.

"Mrs. Matson," he replied.

"Oh, you're the new family that moved into town?" and there was something of a change in the irate lady's manner.

"Yes, we live in the big yellow house near——"

"It's right back of our place, Mrs. Peterkin," put in Tom eagerly.

"Hum! I've been intending to call on your mother," went on Mrs. Peterkin, ignoring Tom. "I always call on all the new arrivals in town, but I've been so busy with my housework and Spring cleaning——"

She paused and gazed about the kitchen. That, at least, would need cleaning over again.

"Yes," she resumed, "I always call and invite them to join our Sewing and Dorcas Societies."

"My mother belonged to both!" exclaimed Joe eagerly. "That is in Bentville where we lived. I heard her saying she wondered if there was a society here."

"There is," answered Mrs. Peterkin majestically, "and I think I shall call soon, and ask her to join. You may tell her I said so," she added as if it was a great honor.

"I will," answered Joe. "And now if you'll tell me where I can get some old cloths I'll help clean up this muss."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Peterkin slowly. Clearly her manner had undergone a great change. "I suppose boys must have their fun," she said with something like a sigh. "I know you didn't mean to do it, but my apple sauce is spoiled."

"I'll pay for it," offered Joe eagerly. He was beginning to see a rift in the trouble clouds.

"No," said Mrs. Peterkin, "it's all right. I have plenty more apples."

"Then let us help clean the place?" asked Tom.

"No, indeed!" she exclaimed, with as near a laugh as she ever indulged. "I don't want any men folks traipsing around my kitchen. I'll clean it myself."

"Well, let us black the stove for you," offered Tom.

"That's it, Alvira," put in Mr. Peterkin quickly. He rather sided with the boys,

and he was glad that the mention of Joe's mother, and the possibility of Mrs. Peterkin getting a new member for the societies, of both of which she was president, had taken her mind off her desire for revenge. "Let the boys black the stove. You know you always hate that work."

"Well, I suppose they could do that," she admitted somewhat reluctantly. "But don't splatter it all over, though the land knows this kitchen can't be worse."

Behold then, a little later, two of the members of the Silver Star nine industriously cleaning hardened apple sauce off the Peterkin kitchen stove, and blackening it until it shone brightly.

"I'm glad Sam Morton can't see us," spoke Tom in a whisper.

"Yes; we'd never hear the last of it," agreed Joe.

They finished the work and even Mrs. Peterkin, careful housekeeper that she was, admitted that the stove "looked fairly good."

"And be sure and tell your mother that I'm coming to call on her," she added, as Joe and Tom were about to leave.

"Yes, ma'am," answered the centre fielder, and then he paused on the threshold of the kitchen.

"Have you forgotten something?" asked Mrs. Peterkin, who was preparing to give the place a thorough scrubbing.

"We—er—that is——" stammered Joe.

"It's their baseball, I guess," put in Mr. Peterkin. "It is in the kettle of apple sass, Alvira."

"Oh, yes; so it is," she agreed, and this time she really laughed. "Well, you may have it," she added. "I don't want it." With a dipper she fished it up from the bottom of the kettle, put it under the water faucet to clean it, and held it out to Joe.

"Thanks," he said as he took it and hurried off with Tom, before anything more could be said.

"Whew!" exclaimed Tom, when they were out in the lots again. "That was a hot time while it lasted. And we got out of it mighty lucky, thanks to your mother. Mrs. Peterkin is great on the society business, and I guess she thought if she gave it to us too hot your mother wouldn't call on her. Yes, we were lucky all right. Want to practice some more?"

"Not to-day," replied Joe with a smile. "I've had enough. Besides, this ball is all wet and slippery. Anyhow there's lots more time, and I guess the next day we do

it we'll go down to the fairgrounds."

"Yes, there's more room there, and no kettles of apple sauce," agreed Tom, with a laugh.

As Tom had an errand to do down town for his father he did not accompany Joe back to their respective homes.

"I'll see you to-night," he called to his chum, as they parted, "and we'll arrange for some more practice. I think it's doing you good."

"I know my arm is a bit sore," complained Joe.

"Then you want to take good care of it," said Tom quickly. "All the authorities in the book say that a pitching arm is too valuable to let anything get the matter with it. Bathe it with witch hazel to-night."

"I will. So long."

As Joe had not many lessons to prepare that night, and as it was still rather early and he did not want to go home, he decided to take a little walk out in the country for a short distance. As he trudged along he was thinking of many things, but chief of all was his chances for becoming at least a substitute pitcher on the Silver Stars.

"If I could get in the box, and was sure of going to boarding school, I wouldn't ask anything else in this world," said Joe to himself. Like all boys he had his ambitions, and he little realized how such ambitions would change as he became older. But they were sufficient for him now.

Before he knew it he had covered several miles, for the day was a fine Spring one, just right for walking, and his thoughts, being subject to quick changes, his feet kept pace with them.

As he made a turn in the road he saw, just ahead of him, an old building that had once, so some of the boys had told him, been used as a spring-house for cooling the butter and milk of the farm to which it belonged. But it had now fallen into disuse, though the spring was there yet.

The main part of it was covered by the shed, but the water ran out into a hollowed-out tree trunk where a coconut shell hung as a dipper.

"Guess I'll have a drink," mused Joe. "I'm as dry as a fish and that's fine water." He had once taken some when he and Tom Davis took a country stroll.

As he was sipping the cool beverage he heard inside the old shed the murmur of voices.

"Hum! Tramps I guess," reasoned Joe to himself. But a moment later he knew it

could not be tramps for the words he heard were these:

“And do you think you can get control of the patents?”

“I’m sure of it,” was the answer. “He doesn’t know about the reverting clause in his contract, and he’s working on a big improvement in a corn——”

Then the voice died away, though Joe strained his ears in vain to catch the other words. Somehow he felt vaguely uneasy.

“Where have I heard that first voice before?” he murmured, racking his brains. Then like a flash it came to him. The quick, incisive tones were those of Mr. Rufus Holdney, of Moorville, to whom he had once gone with a letter from Mr. Matson.

“And if you can get the patents,” went on Mr. Holdney, “then it means a large sum of money.”

“For both of us,” came the eager answer, and Joe wondered whom the other man could be.

“You are sure there won’t be any slip-up?” asked Mr. Holdney.

“Positively. But come on. We’ve been here long enough and people might talk if they saw us here together. Yet I wanted to have a talk with you in a quiet place, and this was the best one I could think of. I own this old farm.”

“Very well, then I’ll be getting back to Moorville. Be sure to keep me informed how the thing goes.”

“I will.”

There was a movement inside the shed as if the men were coming out.

“I’d better make myself scarce,” thought Joe.

He had just time to drop down behind a screen of bushes when the two men did emerge. Joe had no need to look to tell who one was, but he was curious in regard to the other. Cautiously he peered up, and his heart almost stopped beating as he recognized Mr. Isaac Benjamin, the manager of the Royal Harvester Works where the boy’s father was employed.

“There’s some crooked work on hand, I’ll bet a cookie!” murmured Joe, as he crouched down again while the two men walked off up the country road.

Chapter 16: Mr. Matson Is Alarmed

Joe Matson did not know what to do. He wanted to rush away from where he was

concealed, get home as quickly as possible, and tell his father what he had overheard. While Mr. Matson's name had not been mentioned, knowing, as Joe did, that his parent was engaged on some patents, seeing Mr. Benjamin, manager of the Harvester works, and having heard the conversation between him and Mr. Holdney, the lad was almost certain that some danger threatened his father.

"And yet I can't get away from here until they're well out of sight," reasoned Joe. "If I go now they'll see or hear me, and they'll be bound to suspect something. Yet I'd like to warn dad as soon as I can. There's no telling when they may put up some job against him."

But Joe could only crouch down there and wait.

At length he could stand it no longer. He reasoned that the men must be far enough away by this time to make it safe for him to emerge.

"They're on the road to Riverside," thought Joe, "and I may run into them, but if I see them I can slip into the fields and go around. Mr. Benjamin doesn't know me, for he's hardly ever noticed me when I've been to the Harvester works to see dad. But Mr. Holdney might remember me. I can't take any chances."

Cautiously he emerged from the bushes, and looked as far down the road as he could. There was no one in sight, and he started off. A little distance farther on, the road made a sharp turn and, just at the angle stood an old barn which hid the rest of the highway from sight until one was right at the turn. It was a dangerous place for vehicles, but the owner of the barn had refused to set it back.

No sooner had Joe turned this corner than he came full upon Mr. Benjamin and Mr. Holdney standing just around the barn, apparently in deep conversation. At the sight of Joe they looked up quickly, and Mr. Benjamin exclaimed:

"Ha! Perhaps this lad can tell us. We want to hire a carriage. Do you know any one around here who would let us take one for a short time?"

Joe, who had started back at the unexpected sight of the two men, took courage on hearing this, and realizing that he had not yet been recognized.

"I don't know any one around here," he said. "I'm pretty much of a stranger myself, but have you tried at this farmhouse?" and he pointed toward the one where the owner of the barn lived.

"Oh, we don't want a farm horse!" exclaimed Mr. Holdney. "We want something that has some speed." Then, as he looked more fully at Joe he exclaimed: "Haven't I seen you somewhere before, my lad? I'm sure I have!"

He took a step toward our hero, and Joe's heart gave a flutter. He was almost

certain that Mr. Holdney would recognize him and then the next step would be to ask where he had been. The men might at once suspect that he had at least come past the place where they had been talking in secret, and they might even suspect that he had listened to them. Joe was in a predicament.

"I'm sure I've met you somewhere before," went on Mr. Holdney, in his quick, nervous tones. "Do you live around here?"

"Yes," answered Joe vaguely. "But I don't know where you could get a fast horse unless it's in town—in Riverside."

He was about to pass on, hoping the men would not further bother him, when Mr. Holdney, coming a step nearer, said with great firmness:

"I'm sure I've seen you before. What's your name?"

Like a flash a way out of it came to Joe, and that without telling an untruth.

"I play on the Silver Stars," he said quickly. "You may have seen me at some of the games," which was perfectly possible.

"That's it!" exclaimed Mr. Holdney. "I knew it was somewhere. Now——"

"I'm going into Riverside," went on Joe quickly. "If you like I'll stop at the livery stable and tell them to send out a rig for you if you want to wait here for it."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Mr. Benjamin. "Let him do that, Rufus. Here's a quarter to pay for your trouble, my lad."

"No, thank you!" exclaimed Joe with a laugh. "I'm glad to do you a favor."

"All right," assented Mr. Benjamin. "If you'll send out a two-seated carriage and a man to drive it we'll be obliged to you. Then we can drive over and see Duncan," he added to Mr. Holdney. "We'll fix this thing all up now."

"Yes, and if it's my father you're trying to 'fix,'" mused Joe, "I'll do my best to put a stop to it. Now, it's up to me to hurry home," and telling the men that he would do the errand for them, the lad hastened off down the road, leaving the two conspirators in earnest conversation.

The livery stable keeper readily agreed to send out the carriage, and then Joe lost no time in hurrying to his house.

"Has father come home yet?" he asked of his mother, for sometimes Mr. Matson came from the harvester works earlier than the regular stopping time.

"No," answered Mrs. Matson, "why, what is the matter, Joe? Has anything happened?" for she noticed by his face that something out of the usual had occurred.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered slowly. He was revolving in his mind whether or not he ought to tell his mother. Then, as he recollected that his father always consulted her on business matters, he decided that he would relate his experience.

"Mother," he said, "isn't father interested in some sort of a patent about corn?"

"About corn? Oh, I know what you mean. Yes, he is working on an improvement to a corn reaper and binder. It is a machine partly owned by the harvester people, but he expects to make considerable money by perfecting the machine. It is very crude now, and doesn't do good work."

"And if he does perfect it, and some one gets the patents away from him, he won't make the money!" exclaimed Joe.

"Joe, what do you mean?" cried his mother in alarm. "I am sure something has happened. What is it?"

"It hasn't happened yet, but it may any time," answered the lad, and then he told of what he had overheard, and his ideas of what was pending.

"That's why I wanted to see father in a hurry, to warn him," he concluded.

"Joe, I believe you're right!" exclaimed Mrs. Matson. "Your father ought to be told at once. I don't know what he can do—if anything—to prevent these men getting ahead of him. Oh, it's too bad! I know he always suspected Mr. Benjamin of not being strictly honest, but Mr. Holdney used to be his friend and on several occasions has loaned your father money. Oh, this is too bad, but perhaps it isn't too late. If I were you I'd go down toward the harvester works and you may meet father coming home. Then you can tell him all about it, and he may want to go back and get some of his papers, or parts of the machine, from his office so those men can't take them."

"That's the very thing, mother!" cried Joe. "You ought to have been a man—or a boy and a baseball player! You can think so quickly. That reminds me; I had quite an experience to-day. Just say 'apple sauce' to me when I get back, and I'll tell you all about it."

"It can't be possible!" exclaimed Mr. Matson, when Joe, having met him just outside the harvester works, told him of what he had heard. "It hardly seems possible that they would do such a thing. But I'm glad you told me, Joe."

"Do you think they meant you, dad? I didn't hear them mention your name."

"Of course they meant me!" declared Mr. Matson. "The warning came just in time, too, for only to-day I finished an important part of the machinery and the pattern of it is in my office now. I must go back and get it. Wait here for me."

As Joe stood at the outer gate of the big harvester plant he heard the sound of a carriage approaching, and turning around he saw Mr. Benjamin and Mr. Holdney coming along in the rig Joe had had sent out to them only a little while before.

"I thought better to drive back here first, and go see Duncan later," Mr. Benjamin was saying, and then both men caught sight of our hero.

Chapter 17: A Throwing Contest

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Benjamin. "There's that same lad again!"

"What lad?" quickly demanded Mr. Holdney. "Oh, the one who sent us out this rig. I wonder——"

"Did you want to see any one around the works?" interrupted Mr. Benjamin. "I don't want to seem impolite, after the service you rendered, but we don't allow loiterers here."

A number of thoughts passed rapidly through Joe's mind. He realized that his father might come out at any moment and be seen by the manager carrying off the valuable patterns. Mr. Matson ought to be warned, for Joe realized that if they were to frustrate the conspiracy it would be best that the men did not know that they were on the verge of discovery.

"I want to take a message to Mr. Matson," said Joe boldly, for this was the truth. He had quickly formed a plan in his mind, and he hoped that it would not be discovered that he was Mr. Matson's son. It was this very trick of quick thinking that afterward became of so much service to Joe in his notable career on the diamond.

"Oh, then it's all right," said Mr. Benjamin. "You may go in. You'll find Mr. Matson in his office, I dare say." He smiled at Joe in what he doubtless meant to be a friendly fashion, but the young baseball player could not help but see the hypocrisy in it.

Not pausing to exchange any other talk, Joe slipped in through the big iron gate and made his way to his father's office. He had been there before.

Just as he reached it the heavy whistle blew, announcing closing time, and hundreds of hands began pouring from the various machine and casting shops.

"Hello, Joe!" called Seth Potter, who played left field for the Silver Stars. "What you doing here, looking for a job?" Seth was employed in one of the offices, and was considered a valuable young man.

"Yes, I want to learn how to make a machine so I don't miss any flies that come

my way," laughed Joe.

"That's right! Going to play with us Saturday?"

"I hope so," and then, with a few other pleasant words, Seth hurried on, and Joe sought his father. He found Mr. Matson wrapping up some models.

"Quick dad!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Benjamin and Mr. Holdney are out at the gate. They just drove up. I slipped in to warn you!"

"Good, Joe! I'm glad you did. I wouldn't want them to see me taking these things away, for it would tell them that their game was discovered, and I want to find out more of what their plans are before they are aware of it."

"But how you going to get out?" asked his son. "They're there yet," he added, for he could look from a window and see the carriage still at the gate.

"Oh, you and I can slip out the back way. It's lucky you told me. There, I'm ready," and having locked his desk, Mr. Matson took his package and with Joe went out of a rear exit, going home by a roundabout way so that the conspirators did not see them.

"My! I wish this thing hadn't happened, or that it was postponed for a while," said Mr. Matson thoughtfully as he walked along.

"Why, is it likely to be serious, dad?"

"I'm afraid so. You see I have a peculiar arrangement with the harvester concern in regard to things that I might invent. It is too complicated to go into all the details, but I have to trust to their honor to give me my rights in certain matters. If they wanted to they could deprive me of the benefits of my patents and the law could not help me. So I have to be very careful. Up to now I have trusted Mr. Benjamin implicitly, but now—now I will be on my guard. It is a lucky thing you overheard that talk."

There was an earnest consultation between Mr. and Mrs. Matson that night, to which Joe and his sister were not admitted, for it was business they would not have understood. But at the close they were told to say nothing of what had happened that day.

"I will keep right on at the harvester works as if nothing had occurred," said Mr. Matson, "and then they will not get suspicious. But I will do the most important and secret work on my invention here at home."

"Now that it is all settled," said Clara, "I'm going to say 'apple sauce' to you, Joe. What does it mean?"

"Oh, yes," and the young baseball player laughed. "Well I guess you've got to join the Dorcas and Sewing societies, mother, to keep me out of a scrape," and

with many funny touches Joe told about his wild throw that day, making an amusing story of it.

"Oh, I would have given anything if some of the girls and I could have been there when you and Tom were blacking the stove!" exclaimed Clara with a laugh.

"I'm glad you weren't," declared Joe, "though it's lucky we didn't have to mop up the floor. After this I'm going to go a mile away from her house when I want to practice throwing."

"I should think you would," agreed Mr. Matson.

"But you'll join those societies; won't you mother?" asked Joe.

"Oh, I suppose I'll have to, in order to keep you out of prison," she agreed with a laugh. "But please don't make any more engagements for me, as my time is pretty well occupied."

It was two days after this when Tom Davis, coming out of school, caught up with Joe who was a little in advance of him.

"Got anything special to do?" asked the substitute first baseman.

"No, why?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to go out in the lot again, and have some more practice."

"Back of Mrs. Peterkin's house?" asked Joe with a smile.

"I should say not! But I've got a new scheme. I read about it in that baseball book. We'll have a contest for long distance throwing and accuracy."

"How do you mean?"

"Why you and I'll go down in the same lots but we'll throw in the other direction. Then we can't hit anything. We'll see who can throw the farthest. You'll need to practice that if you are to play centre field."

"What's the other contest?"

"For straight aim. I'll get an old basket, and we'll see who can land the most balls in it. Want to try?"

"Sure. Anything to improve myself," said Joe earnestly.

A little later he and his chum were on their way to the vacant lots. As they walked along they met several other lads, some of whom played on the regular team, a few from the High School nine, and some from the Silver Star scrub.

"What's doing?" demanded Rodney Burke.

"We're going to see who is the best thrower," answered Tom.

"Give us a show at it?" requested Ford Wilson.

"Sure," assented Joe. "The more, the merrier."

Soon a jolly crowd of youngsters were taking turns at the long distance throwing. After several tries the record lay between Joe and Rodney Burke, and they played off a tie, Joe winning by about seven feet.

"That's a good throw all right," complimented the loser.

"A fellow who's playing centre field needs to have a pretty good heave," said Joe. "Especially if he's up against a heavy-hitting team."

"And that's been our luck for some time past," spoke Tom. "Well, now for the basket test."

This was more difficult than straight throwing for distance and several of the lads dropped out, being disqualified by failures. But Tom, Joe and Rodney remained in, and for a time it was pretty even between them. Finally it narrowed down to Tom and Joe, and they were just ready to throw the deciding round when a new voice called out:

"Any objections to me joining?"

Joe and the others turned, to see the half-mocking face of Sam Morton.

Chapter 18: Another Defeat

For a moment there was some embarrassment, as Sam was not in the habit of mingling with this crowd of boys. He had his own friends, not very many, to tell the truth, but he was usually with them. The lads did not know exactly how to take his request, but Joe came to the rescue.

"Sure you can come in," he said heartily. "We're just seeing who can put the most balls in the basket."

"What good do you think that does?" asked Sam.

"Well, doesn't it help a fellow to get a straight aim?" asked Tom, half defiantly.

"Oh, I don't know," was the rather sneering answer. "It might, if you kept at it long enough."

"Let's see you try it," suggested Rodney Burke, who did not hold Sam in much awe.

Carelessly the Silver Star pitcher accepted a ball that Joe obligingly held out. He

threw quickly and the ball landed squarely in the basket. Then he did the trick again, and there was a little murmur of applause, for only a few of the boys had "two straight" to their credit.

"Joe did three straight a while ago," said Tom proudly. "He and I are playing off a tie."

Sam did not answer but threw again, and the ball went wide of the basket by two feet at least. Rodney laughed.

"You're not such a much, even if you are the pitcher," he declared.

"Who asked you anything about it?" demanded Sam savagely.

He darted a look of anger at the lad, but as Rodney was well built and had a reputation for "scrappiness" Sam concluded not to tackle him just then.

"I'll show you how to throw!" he exclaimed the next moment, and two balls went squarely in the basket. "Now, let's see you and Matson play it off," commanded Sam to Tom as though he was in the habit of having his wishes complied with.

Whether it was nervousness or not, or whether he wanted to see his chum do well when Sam was present, was not made manifest, but Tom did not come up to his previous record, and Joe easily won. In fact Joe made a much better score than Sam, and there were several curious glances directed at the pitcher.

"Don't you want to try it some more?" asked Rodney Burke, and there was mockery in his voice.

"No!" half-growled Sam. "I've got to save my arm for the next game. We're going to win that sure. So long," and with that he turned and strode away.

"As cheerful as a bear with a sore nose," remarked Rodney.

Ordinarily but little importance would have been attached to the coming game with the Denville Whizzers, but on account of two previous defeats, Darrell Blackney and George Rankin had several conferences concerning it. The captain and manager were plainly worried.

"Do you wish you had some one else to put in the box?" asked Rankin.

"Well, not exactly," was the answer. "I haven't lost faith in Sam, but I do wish we could depend more on him. He'll pitch fine for several innings and then go to pieces. He tries to use too much speed and too many varieties of curves, I think."

"By the way, what do you think of young Matson?" asked the captain.

"I think a good deal of him. He doesn't amount to much as yet, but he's in earnest and he's got grit. In time I think he'll make a player."

"He wants to pitch."

"I know he does, but it's out of the question yet. Have you any line on him?"

"Not yet," answered Rankin, "but I'll keep my eyes open. He's a good fielder all right, now that he isn't so nervous. He wants to play his head off. But Sam—well, we can't do any better right away, and—well, I guess we'll win this game."

"We've got to!" insisted the manager earnestly, "if we want the people of Riverside to support us. They won't come to see a losing home team all the while."

The game with the Whizzers was to take place on their grounds, and early on that morning the Silver Stars, some substitutes, and a crowd of "rooters" got ready for the trip. Denville was about seven miles from Riverside, back from the stream, and could be reached by trolley. A special car had been engaged for the team.

The game started off well, and the Silver Stars got three runs in their half of the first inning. The home team was blanked and for a time it looked as if there would be an easy victory for the visitors.

Sam was pitching in good form, and had struck several men out. For three innings the home team did not get a run, and there was only one to their credit in the fourth. There was gloom and despair among their supporters while the "rooters" of the visiting team were happy singing songs and yelling.

Joe played well and had two outs to his credit on long flies, with no errors to mar his record. But he noticed that as the home team came to the bat in their half of the fifth, in which the Silver Stars had made two runs, that Darrell and the captain were in earnest consultation with Sam. They seemed to be remonstrating with him, and Joe heard the manager say:

"Take it easy now; we have the game on ice."

"Oh, I know how to play ball," retorted the pitcher.

Then began a series of happenings. With a lead of four runs when the last half of the fifth started it would have seemed that the Stars might have won out. But Sam fell a prey to the applause of the crowd and began to do "grandstand" work. He contorted his body unnecessarily in winding up for a delivery. He hopped about before pitching the ball and he failed to study the batters, though he had had plenty of chance to do so.

The result was that he went to pieces through sheer weariness and began giving balls. Then the home team, realizing what was happening, began to pound him, and to steal bases. In their half of the fifth the home team made six runs, putting them two ahead.

"We've got to stop that!" said Darrell, with a shake of his head.

"We sure have," agreed the captain.

There was somewhat of a brace on the part of the Stars and they made one run in their part of the sixth. But the Whizzers kept pace with them. The seventh inning resulted in one run for the visitors and none for the home team and that made only a lead of one for the home nine.

Joe brought in a run in the eighth, but as if it had been prearranged the home team duplicated so the score at the beginning of the ninth stood eight to nine in favor of the home team.

"We need two runs to win, if we can serve them goose eggs for lunch," said the Silver Star captain grimly. "Go to it, boys; beat 'em out."

"Sure we will," said Sam airily, and he brought in one of the needed two runs. Darrell contributed the other, and when the visiting team took the field they were one ahead.

"Don't let a man get to first!" cried Captain Rankin.

But it was not to be. Sam gave the first man his base on balls and there was a groan of anguish from his fellows and the Riverside crowd. Then the second man whacked out what appeared to be a pretty three bagger, scoring the runner from first. The batter slipped on his way from second to third, however, and was put out when Joe made a magnificent throw in from deep centre.

With one out Sam gathered himself together and struck out the next man. Then came to the bat the mightiest walloper of the rival team.

"Wait for a good one. Make him give you what you want," advised the coacher to the batter.

And the latter did wait, for when he got what he wanted he "slammed it" away out in centre field.

"A home run! A home run!" yelled the frantic crowd.

"And win the game!" shouted a score of the players' friends. "Come on, baby-mine!"

Joe was madly racing after the ball, which had gone away beyond him. He got it and hurled it to second for a relay home, as a quick glance had shown him the man rounding third.

Straight and true the ball went and the baseman had it. Then he sent it to Catcher Ferguson as the runner was racing in. Sam had run from his box and stood watching and expectant near home plate.

The runner dropped and slid and Bart Ferguson, as the ball landed in his mitt, reached over to touch him.

"Safe!" howled the umpire, and it meant the defeat of the Silver Stars.

For a moment there was silence and then Sam, stepping up to the umpire, a lad smaller than himself, said:

"Safe, eh? Not in a thousand years! You don't know how to umpire a game. Safe! I guess not!" and drawing back his fist Sam sent it crashing into the face of the other lad.

Chapter 19: Joe Is Watched

There was an uproar in an instant. Players started for Sam and the unoffending lad whom he had struck. There were savage yells, calling for vengeance. Even Sam's mates, used as they were to his fits of temper, were not prepared for this. The Whizzer players were wild to get at him, but, instinctively Darrell, Joe, Rankin, and some of the others of the Silver Stars formed a protecting cordon about their pitcher.

"Are you crazy, Sam? What in the world did you do that for?" demanded the manager.

"He made a rank decision, an unfair one!" cried Sam, "and when I called him down he was going to hit me. I got in ahead of him—that's all."

"That's not so!" cried the Whizzer captain. "I saw it all."

"That's right!" chimed in some of his mates.

"Farson never raised his hand to him!" declared another lad, who had been standing near the umpire. "You're a big coward to hit a chap smaller than you are!" he called tauntingly to Sam.

"Well, I'm not afraid to hit you!" cried the pitcher, who seemed to have lost control of himself. "And if you want anything you know how to get it."

"Yes, and I'm willing to take it right now," yelled the other, stepping up to Sam.

There might have been another fight then and there, for both lads were unreasonable with anger, but Darrell quickly stepped in between them.

"Look here!" burst out the Stars' manager, in what he tried to make a good-natured and reasoning voice, "this has got to stop. We didn't come here to fight, we came to play baseball and you trimmed us properly."

"Then why don't you fellows take your medicine?" demanded the home captain.

"What right has he got to tackle our umpire?"

"No right at all," admitted Darrell. "Sam was in the wrong and he'll apologize. He probably thought the man was out."

"And he was out!" exploded the unreasonable pitcher. "I'll not apologize, either."

"Wipe up the field with 'em!" came in murmurs from the home players. Several of the lads had grasped their bats.

It was a critical moment and Darrell felt it. He pulled Sam to one side and whispered rapidly and tensely in his ear:

"Sam, you've got to apologize, and you've got to admit that the runner was safe. There's no other way out of it."

"Suppose I won't?"

There was defiance in Sam's air. Darrell took a quick decision.

"Then I'll put you out of the team!" was his instant rejoinder, and it came so promptly that Sam winced.

Now it is one thing to resign, but quite another to be read out of an organization, whether it be a baseball team or a political society. Sam realized this. He might have, in his anger, refused to belong to the Silver Stars and, later on he could boast of having gotten out of his own accord. But to be "fired" carried no glory with it, and Sam was ever on the lookout for glory.

"Do you mean that?" he asked of Darrell. "Won't you fellows stick up for me?"

He looked a vain appeal to his mates.

"I mean every word of it," replied the manager firmly. "We fellows would stick up for you if you were in the right, but you're dead wrong this time. It's apologize or get out of the team!"

Once more Sam paused. He could hear the angry murmurs of the home players as they watched him, waiting for his decision. Even some of his own mates were regarding him with unfriendly eyes. He must make a virtue of necessity.

"All right—I—I apologize," said Sam in a low voice. "The runner was safe I guess."

"You'd better be sure about it," said the captain of the Whizzers, in a peculiar tone as he looked at Sam.

"Oh, I'm sure all right."

"And you're sorry you hit our umpire?" persisted the captain, for Sam's apology had not been very satisfactory.

"Yes. You needn't rub it in," growled the pitcher.

"Then why don't you shake hands with him, and tell him so like a man?" went on the home captain.

"I won't shake hands with him!" exclaimed the small umpire. "I don't shake hands with cowards!"

There was another murmur, and the trouble that had been so nearly adjusted threatened to break out again. But Darrell was wise in his day.

"That's all right!" he called, more cheerily than he felt. "You fellows beat us fairly and on the level. We haven't a kick coming, but we may treat you to a dose of the same medicine when we have a return game; eh, old man?" and he made his way to the opposing captain and the manager and cordially shook hands with them. There was a half cheer from the Whizzers. They liked a good loser.

"Yes, maybe you can turn the tables on us," admitted the other manager, "but I hope when we do come to Riverside you'll have a different pitcher," and he glanced significantly at Sam.

"No telling," replied Darrell with a laugh. "Come on, fellows. We'll give three cheers for the team that beat us and then we'll beat it for home."

It was rather a silent crowd of the Silver Stars that rode in the special trolley. Following them was another car containing some of the "rooters." They made up in liveliness what the team members lacked in spirits, for there were a number of girls with the lads, Joe's sister and Tom's being among them, and they started some school songs.

And the gloom that seemed to hang over the Stars was not altogether because of their defeat. It was the remembrance of Sam's unsportsmanlike act, and it rankled deep.

On his part it is doubtful if Sam felt any remorse. He was a hot-tempered lad, used to having his own way, and probably he thought he had done just right in chastising the umpire for what he regarded as a rank decision.

Darrell, Rankin and some of the others tried to be jolly and start a line of talk that would make the lads forget the unpleasant incident, but it is doubtful if they succeeded to any great extent.

The manager was seriously considering the future of the team. Was it wise to go on with such a pitcher as Sam who, though talented, could not be relied upon and who was likely to make "breaks" at unexpected times?

"Yet what can we do?" asked Darrell of the captain. "Is there another man we could put in or get from some other team?"

"I don't believe any other team would part with a good pitcher at this time of the season," replied Rankin. "Surely not if he was a real good one, and we want one that is good. As for using some of the other fellows in Sam's place, I don't know of any one that's anywhere near as good as he is."

"How about Percy Parnell? He's pitched some, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but you know what happened. He was knocked out of the box and we were whitewashed that game."

"Say!" exclaimed Darrell. "I just happened to think of it. That new fellow—Joe Matson. He told me he used to pitch in his home town—Bentville I think it was. I wonder if he'd be any good?"

"Hard telling," replied the captain, somewhat indifferently. "We ought to do something, anyhow."

"I tell you what I'm going to do," went on Darrell. "I'm going to write to some one in Bentville. I think I know an old baseball friend there, and I'll ask him what Matson's record was. If he made good at all we might give him a tryout."

"And have Sam get on his ear?"

"I don't care whether he does or not. Things can't be much worse; can they?"

"No, I guess not. Go ahead. I'm with you in anything you do. Three straight wallops in three weeks have taken the heart out of me."

"Same here. Well, we'll see what we can do."

Joe reached home that night rather tired and discouraged. He felt the defeat of his team keenly, and the more so as the nine he had played with in Bentville had had a much better record than that of the Silver Stars—at least so far, though the Silver Stars were an older and stronger team.

"I wonder if I'm the hoodoo?" mused Joe. "They lost the first game I saw them play, and the next one I played in they lost, and here's this one. I hope I'm not a jinx."

Then he reviewed his own playing in the two games where he had had a chance to show what he could do, and he had no fault to find with his efforts. True, he had made errors; but who had not?

"I'm going to keep on practicing," mused Joe. "If I can work up in speed and accuracy, and keep what curving power I have already, I may get a chance to pitch. Things are coming to a head with Sam, and, though I don't wish him any bad luck, if he does get out I hope I get a chance to go in."

Following this plan, Joe went off by himself one afternoon several days later to

practice throwing in the empty lot. He used a basket to hold the balls he pitched and he was glad to find that he had not gone back any from the time when he and Tom, with the other lads, had had their contest.

"If I can only keep this up," mused the lad, "I'll get there some day. Jove! If ever I should become one of the big league players! Think of taking part in the World's series! Cracky! I'd rather be in the box, facing the champions, than to be almost anything else I can think of. Forty thousand people watching you as you wind up and send in a swift one like this!"

And with that Joe let fly a ball with all his speed toward the basket. He was not so much intent on accuracy then as he was in letting off some surplus "steam," and he was not a little surprised when the ball not only went into the basket but through it, ripping out the bottom.

"Wow!" exclaimed Joe. "I'm throwing faster than I thought I was. That basket is on the fritz. But if I'd been sending a ball over the plate it would have had some speed back of it, and it would have gone to the right spot."

As Joe went to pick up the ball and examine the broken basket more closely a figure peered out from a little clump of trees on the edge of the field where the lad was practicing. The figure watched the would-be pitcher closely and then murmured:

"He certainly has speed all right. I'd like to be back of the plate and watch him throw them in. I wonder if he has anything in him after all? It's worth taking a chance on. I'll wait a bit longer."

The figure dodged behind the trees again as Joe once more took his position. He had stuffed some grass in the hole in the peach basket he was using, and again he threw in it.

He was just as accurate as before, and, now and then, when he cut loose, he sent the ball with unerring aim and with great force into the receptacle, several times knocking it down off the stake on which it was fastened.

"I don't know as there's much use in writing to Bentville to find out about him," mused the figure hidden by the trees. "If he's got that speed, and continues to show the control he has to-day, even without any curves he'd be a help to us. I'm going to speak to Rankin about it," and with that the figure turned away.

Had Joe looked he would have seen Darrell Blackney, manager of the Silver Stars, who had been playing the innocent spy on him.

Chapter 20: "Would You Like To Pitch?"

"Come now, fellows, let's get into practice. Are all the scrub here?"

Darrell Blackney looked around over the diamond, where about twenty lads were assembled one fine afternoon.

"I don't know about the scrub, but all our fellows are on hand," replied Rankin. "Is it all arranged about the game Saturday?"

"Yes, we're to play the Fayetteville Academy lads on their grounds."

"A trip out of town, eh? That's two in two weeks."

"Well it gives our fellows experience in playing on some other diamond than their own."

"Oh, it doesn't much matter. The Fayettevilles will be easy fruit for us."

"Don't be too sure. They're a younger team, that's true, and they haven't been doing well this season, but neither have we of late."

"Oh, we'll beat 'em," declared the captain confidently.

"I think so myself, but I don't want you to take too many chances. Here comes Sam. You and he get in for some warm-up work, Bart, and I'll get the scrub together."

Darrell went about the diamond, calling to the various members of the "scrub," or second team.

"We haven't any pitcher," remarked Blake Carrington, who acted as captain of the scrub organization.

"What's the matter with Slater?"

"He hasn't showed up, and none of the other fellows feel like getting in the box against you boys. You'll have to find us a pitcher before we can play."

A sudden idea came to Darrell.

"All right," he answered. "I guess I can. Wait a minute."

He ran over to where Rankin was talking to some of his players.

"Can you play Tom Davis in centre field for to-day?" asked the manager.

"Yes, I guess so. Why?"

"I'm going to have Joe Matson pitch on the scrub. It will be a good time to get a line on him, and I'll see if he shapes up as well as the day he did when I watched him practice."

"All right; maybe it will be a good idea."

Joe hardly knew what to say when Darrell, as calmly as if he had done it several times before, asked him to go in the box for the scrub and pitch against the Silver Stars.

"And do your best," added Darrell. "I don't care how many of our fellows you strike out. Every one, if you can."

Joe's heart gave a bound of delight. It might be the beginning of the very chance he had been waiting for so long. He calmed himself with an effort for he did not want to get "rattled."

"All right," he answered as though he had been used to such sudden emergency calls all season. "I'll see what I can do. I'd like a chance to warm up, though."

"Sure. You and Jake Bender go over there and practice for five minutes. Then we'll play a five-inning game."

The Stars were to bat first, and there was a mocking smile on the face of Sam Morton as he watched his rival go to the box.

"Don't strike us all out," called Sam. "We've had hard luck enough lately."

The game began, and it was for "blood" from the very start. Joe was a trifle nervous, especially when he had two balls called on his first two efforts. Then he braced himself, and, not trying for speed, sent in a slow, easy ball that completely fooled the batter, who eventually struck out.

"Pretty good for a starter," complimented Darrell. Sam Morton scowled.

The next batter hit an easy fly which was so promptly gathered in by the shortstop that there was little use in the player starting for first. Then Joe struck out the next lad after he had hit a couple of fouls.

"That's the stuff!" cried Tom Davis, as he patted his chum on the back. "You'll be in the box for the Stars yet."

"Don't get me all excited," begged Joe with a smile. Yet he could not help feeling elated.

There was a viciousness in the pitching of Sam when he toed the plate that showed how his feelings had been stirred. He was evidently going to show how much superior he was.

He did strike out two men, and then came Joe's turn at the bat. Our hero thought he detected a gleam of anger in Sam's eyes.

"He'd just as soon hit me with a ball as not," thought Joe, "and if he does it will hurt some. And he may be trying to bluff me so that I won't stand up to the

plate. I'll see what I can do to him."

Consequently, instead of waiting for the ball to get to him Joe stepped up and out to meet it before the curve "broke." He "walked right into it," as the baseball term has it, and the result was that he whacked out a pretty two-bagger that brought his mates to their feet with yells. Sam bit his lips in anger, but he kept his temper by an effort and struck out the next man so that Joe's effort resulted in nothing.

The game went on, and when Sam at bat faced Joe, our hero could not help feeling a trifle nervous. He had sized up Sam's style of batting, however, and was prepared.

"I'm going to give him a slow ball with an in-shoot to it," decided Joe. "He keeps back from the plate and this will make him get still farther back. I'm going to strike him out."

And strike him out Joe did, though not until after Sam had hit one foul that was within a shade of being fair. But when on his next two strikes he fanned the wind, there was a look of wonder and gratification on the face of Darrell.

"I believe Joe is going to make good," he said to Rankin.

"It sure looks so. What about it?"

"You'll see in a minute. I'm going to give him a chance to pitch part of the game against the Fayetteville Academy nine—that is if you agree to it."

"Sure, go as far as you like."

At the close of the game, which was won by the Stars, though by a small margin, Darrell approached Joe.

"Well?" asked the new pitcher diffidently.

"You did first rate. How would you like to pitch part of the game Saturday?"

"Do you mean it?" was the eager question.

"Certainly. I'll put you in for a few innings toward the end, after we've cinched it, for I think it will be easy for us."

It was not the highest honor that could have come to Joe, but he realized what it meant.

"I'd like it immensely," he said, "but won't Sam—what about him?"

"I don't care anything about him," said Darrell quickly. "I'm running this team. Will you pitch?"

"I sure will!" and Joe's heart beat high with hope.

Chapter 21: To The Rescue

Joe Matson felt as though he was walking in the air when he went home that afternoon following the scrub game. That his ambition was about to be realized, and so soon after joining the team, was almost unbelievable.

"Why, what's the matter, Joe?" asked Clara, as her brother fairly pranced into the house, caught her around the waist and swung her in the start of a waltz.

"Matter? Plenty's the matter! I'm going to pitch on the Stars Saturday. Hurray!"

"My! Any one would think you were going to pitch up to the stars the way you're going on. Let go of me; you'll have my hair all mussed up!"

"That's easily fixed. Yes, I'm going to pitch."

"Against whom?"

"The Fayetteville Academy, on their grounds. It won't be much of a game, and I'm not to go in until it's in the ice box——"

"In the ice box?"

"Yes, the refrigerator you know—safe. Then I'm to try my hand at putting 'em over. Of course I'd like to go the whole nine innings but I can't have everything at the start. It's mighty decent of Darrell to give me this chance. Aren't you glad, sis?"

"Yes, of course I am. I'd like to see the game, but I've used up all of my allowance for this week, and——"

"Here!" and Joe held out a dollar. "Blow yourself, sis."

"Oh, what horrid slang!"

"I mean go to the game on me. I'll stand treat. Take a girl if you want to and see yours truly do himself proud."

Joe hunted up his mother to tell her the good news. He found her in the room which his father had fitted up as a workshop since the suspicious actions of Mr. Benjamin at the harvester factory. Mrs. Matson was looking over some papers, and there was on her face the same worried look Joe had seen there before.

"Has anything happened, mother?" he asked quickly, his own good news fading away as he thought of the trouble that might menace his father.

"No, only the same trouble about the patent," she said. "There is nothing new, but your father thinks from the recent actions of Mr. Benjamin that the manager

suspects something. Your father is getting some papers ready to go to Washington, and I was looking them over for him. I used to work in a lawyer's office when I was a girl," she went on with a smile, "and I know a little about the patent business so I thought I would help your father if I could."

"Then there's nothing wrong?"

"Not exactly, and if all goes right he will soon have his patent granted, and then those men can not harm him. But you look as though you had good news."

"I have," and the lad fairly bubbled over in telling his mother of the chance that had so unexpectedly come to him.

Mr. Matson was quite enthusiastic about Joe's chance when he came home from work, and together they talked about it after supper.

"I wish I could go see the game," said Mr. Matson, "but I am too busy."

"How is the patent coming on?" asked Joe.

"Oh, pretty good. Thanks to you I was warned in time. If I had left my drawings, patterns and other things in the shop I'm afraid it wouldn't be going so well. Mr. Benjamin evidently suspects something. Only to-day he asked me how I was coming on with it, and he wanted to know why I wasn't working on it any more. I had to put him off with some excuse and he acted very queer. Right after that I heard him calling up Mr. Holdney on the telephone."

"But your worry will be over when your application is allowed," suggested Mrs. Matson.

Joe went to his baseball practice with a vim in the days that intervened before the game that was to be so important to him. Tom Davis helped him, and several times cautioned his chum about overdoing himself.

"If your arm gets stiff—it's good-night for you," he declared, in his usual blunt way. "You've got to take care of yourself, Joe."

"I know it, but I want to get up more speed."

"That's all right. Speed isn't everything. Practice for control, and that won't be so hard on you."

And, as the days went on, Joe realized that he was perfecting himself, though he still had much to learn about the great game.

It was the day before the contest when our hero was to occupy the box for the first time for the Stars. He and Tom had practiced hard and Joe knew that he was "fit."

Joe wondered how Sam Morton had taken the news of his rival's advance, but if

Sam knew he said nothing about it, and in the practice with the scrub he was unusually friendly to Joe. For Darrell decided not to have the new pitcher go into the box for the Stars until the last moment. He did not want word of it to get out, and Joe and the catcher did some practice in private with signals.

The last practice had been held on the afternoon prior to the game, and arrangements completed for the team going to Fayetteville. Joe was on his way home on a car with Tom Davis, for Riverside boasted of a trolley system.

"How do you feel?" asked Tom of his chum.

"Fine as a fiddle."

"Your arm isn't lame or sore?"

"Not a bit, I can——"

Joe was interrupted by a cry from two ladies who sat in front of them, the only other occupants of the vehicle save themselves. The car was going down hill and had acquired considerable speed—dangerous speed Joe thought—and the motorman did not seem to have it well under control.

But what had caused the cry of alarm was this. Driving along the street, parallel with the tracks, and about three hundred feet ahead of the car, was a boy in an open delivery wagon. He was going in the same direction as was the electric vehicle.

Suddenly his horse stumbled and fell almost on the tracks, the wagon sliding half over the animal while the boy on the seat was hemmed in and pinned down by a number of boxes and baskets that slid forward from the rear of the wagon.

"Put on your brakes! Put on your brakes!" yelled the conductor to the motorman. "You'll run him down!"

The motorman ground at the handle, and the brake shoes whined as they gripped the wheels, but the car came nearer and nearer the wagon. The conductor on the rear platform was also putting on the brakes there.

Suddenly the horse kicked himself around so that he was free of the tracks, lying alongside them, and far enough to one side so that the car would safely pass him. There was a sigh of relief from the two women passengers, but a moment later it changed to a cry of alarm, for the boy on the seat suddenly fell to one side, and hung there with his head so far over that the car would hit him as it rushed past. The lad was evidently pinned down by the boxes and baskets on his legs.

"Stop! Stop the car!" begged one of the ladies. The other had covered her eyes with her hands.

"I—I can't!" cried the motorman. "It's got too much speed! I can't stop it."

Joe sprang to his feet and made his way along the seat past Tom, to the running board of the car, for the vehicle was an open one.

"Where are you going?" cried Tom.

"To save that lad! He'll be killed if the car strikes him!"

"Let the motorman do it!"

"He can't! He's grinding on the brakes as hard as he can and so is the conductor. I've got to save him—these ladies can't! I can lean over and pull him aboard the car."

"But your arm! You'll strain your arm and you can't pitch to-morrow."

For an instant Joe hesitated, but only for an instant. He realized that what Tom said was true. He saw a vision of himself sitting idly on the bench, unable to twirl the ball because of a sprained arm. Then Joe made up his mind.

"I'm going to save him!" he cried as he hurried to the front end of the running board. Then, clinging to the upright of the car with his left arm, he stretched out his other to save the lad from almost certain death, the conductor and motorman unable to lend aid and the women incapable. There was not room on the running board for Tom to help Joe.

Chapter 22: A Delayed Pitcher

The motorman was grinding away at the brakes but the heavy car continued to slide on, for the hill was steep. The horse lay quiet now, for a man had managed to get to him and sit on his head, so the animal could not kick and thresh about with the consequent danger of getting his legs under the trolley. The car would pass the horse and the wagon by a good margin, but the boy, leaning far over, was sure to be hit unless Joe saved him, and no one in the street seemed to think of the boy's danger. He said later that he did not realize it himself.

The lad was struggling to free himself but could not, and he did not seem to be able to raise himself to an upright position on the seat, in which case he would have been safe.

"Steady now!" called Joe, and he braced himself for the shock he knew would come.

The next instant, as the car kept on, Joe found himself opposite the lad and reaching forward his right hand he grasped him by the collar, shoving him away so the car would not strike him. Then, holding on in grim despair Joe pulled the

youth toward him, aided by the momentum of the vehicle. His idea was to get him aboard the car to prevent his being struck by it, and in this he succeeded.

There was a ripping sound, for some part of the lad's clothing was caught on the seat and tore loose. A shower of boxes and baskets followed the body as it slid forward, and a moment later Joe had the lad on the foot board beside him, safe and sound, but very much astonished by his sudden descent from the wagon seat.

Joe felt an excruciating pain shoot through his arm—his pitching arm. It was numb from the shock but even yet he did not dare let go, for the lad was on uncertain footing. The pain increased. It was like being kicked by the back-fire of an auto or motor boat. For a moment there was a dull sensation and then the outraged nerves and muscles seemed to cry out in agony.

"There—there!" murmured Joe between his clenched teeth to the lad he had saved. "You're all right I guess. Will—will somebody——"

He did not finish, but turned to the conductor, who had rushed toward him on the running board, ready to relieve him of the lad's weight. But the boy was able to look after himself now, for the vehicle was almost at a standstill, and the motorman had it under control.

"Much—much obliged to you," the boy stammered his thanks to Joe who was slowly making his way back to where Tom awaited him. Joe did not know whether he could get there or not, passing himself along by clinging with his left hand to the successive car uprights.

"He saved your life all right," said the conductor, who had hold of the delivery wagon lad.

"That's what!" chimed in several other men from the street, as they crowded up around the car.

By this time the motorman had succeeded in bringing the vehicle to a full stop and Joe, fearing he might fall, for the pain was very severe, got off. Tom hurried up to him.

"Did it strain you much?" he asked eagerly.

"A little—yes; considerable I guess," admitted Joe, making a wry face. "But it will be all right—I guess." His right arm—the arm he hoped to use in the game on the morrow—the first game with him in the box—hung limp at his side.

Tom Davis saw and knew at once that something serious was the matter. He realized what it meant to Joe, and he lost no time in useless talk.

"You come with me!" he commanded, taking hold of Joe's left arm.

"Where are you going?" demanded our hero.

"To our old family doctor. That arm of yours will need attention if you're going to pitch to-morrow."

"I don't know that I can pitch, Tom."

"Yes you can—you've got to. Dr. Pickett will give you something to fix it up. You can't let this chance slip. I was afraid this would happen when I saw what you were going to do."

"Yes," said Joe simply, "but I couldn't let him be hit by the car."

"No, I suppose not, and yet—well, we'll see what Dr. Pickett says. Come on," and Tom quickly improvised a sling from his own and Joe's handkerchiefs, and was about to lead his chum away.

"Oh, are you hurt? I'm sorry!" exclaimed the lad whom Joe had saved.

"It's only a strain," said the pitcher, but he did not add what it might mean to him.

The lad thanked Joe again, earnestly, for his brave act and then hastened to look after his horse, that had been gotten to its feet. The motorman, too, thanked Joe for, though had an accident resulted it would not have been his fault, yet he was grateful.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Tom impatiently as several others crowded up around Joe. "Every minute's delay makes it worse. Let's get a move on," and he almost dragged his chum to the doctor's office.

Dr. Pickett looked grave when told of the cause of the injury.

"Well, let's have a look at the arm," he suggested, and when he saw a slight swelling he shook his head. "I'm afraid you can't pitch to-morrow," he said.

"I've got to," replied Joe simply.

"Can't you give him some liniment to rub on to take the stiffness out, doctor?" asked Joe.

"Hum! Nature is something that doesn't like to be hurried, young man," responded the physician. "However, it might be worse, and perhaps if that arm is massaged half the night and up to the time of the game to-morrow, he might pitch a few innings."

"That's good!" exclaimed Joe.

"And it's me for the massage!" cried Tom. "Now give us some stuff to rub on, doctor."

Dr. Pickett showed Tom how to rub the arm, and how to knead the muscles to take out the soreness, and gave the boys a prescription to get filled at the drug store.

"Come on!" cried Tom again. He seemed to have taken charge of Joe as a trainer might have done. "I must get you home and begin work on you."

And Tom did. He installed himself as rubber-in-chief in Joe's room, and for several hours thereafter there was the smell of arnica and pungent liniment throughout the house. Tom was a faithful massage artist, and soon some of the soreness began to get out of the wrenched arm.

"Let me try to throw a ball across the room," the pitcher begged of Tom about nine o'clock. "I want to see if I can move it."

"Not a move!" sternly forbade the nurse. "You just keep quiet. If you can pitch in the morning you'll be lucky."

At intervals until nearly midnight Tom rubbed the arm and then, knowing that Joe must have rest, he installed himself on a couch in his chum's room, and let Joe go to sleep, with his arm wrapped in hot towels saturated with witch hazel, a warm flat iron keeping the heat up.

"Well, how goes it?" Joe heard some one say, as he opened his eyes to find the sun streaming in his room. The young pitcher tried to raise his arm but could not. It seemed as heavy as lead and a look of alarm came over his face.

"That's all right," explained Tom. "Wait until I get off some of the towels. It looks like an Egyptian mummy now."

Tom loosed the wrappings and then, to Joe's delight, he found that he could move his arm with only a little pain resulting. He was about to swing it, as he did when pitching, but Tom called out:

"Hold on now! Wait until I rub it a bit and get up the circulation." The rubbing did good, and Joe found that he had nearly full control of the hand and arm. They were a bit stiff to be sure, but much better.

"Now for a good breakfast, some more rubbing, then some more, and a little light practice," decided Tom, and Joe smiled, but he gave in and ate a hearty meal.

Once more faithful Tom massaged the arm, and rubbed in a salve designed to make the sore muscles and tendons limber. Not until then would he allow Joe to go down in the yard and throw a few balls.

The delivery of the first one brought a look of agony on the pitcher's face, but he kept at it until he was nearly himself again. Then came more rubbing and

another application of salve and liniment, until Joe declared that there wouldn't be any skin left on his arm, and that he'd smell like a walking drug store for a week.

"Don't you care, as long as you can pitch," said Clara. "I'm going to the game and I'm going to take Mabel Davis and Helen Rutherford. They both want to see you pitch, Joe."

"That's good," said her brother with a smile.

"Now we'll take another trip to the doctor's and see what he says," was Tom's next order. The physician looked gratified when he saw the arm.

"Either it wasn't as badly strained as I thought it," he said, "or that medicine worked wonders."

"It was my rubbing," explained Tom, puffing out his chest in pretended pride.

"Well, that certainly completed the cure," admitted the physician.

"And I can pitch?" asked Joe anxiously.

"Yes, a few innings. Have your arm rubbed at intervals in the game, and wear a wrist strap. Good luck and I hope you'll win," and with a smile he dismissed them.

Wearing a wrist strap helped greatly, and when it was nearly time to leave for Fayetteville Joe found that his arm was much better.

"I don't know how long I can last," he said to Darrell, "and maybe I'll be batted out of the box."

"It's too bad, of course," replied the manager, when the accident had been explained to him, "but we won't work you very hard. I want you to get your chance, though."

And Joe felt his heart beat faster as he thought how nearly he had lost his chance. Yet he could not have done otherwise, he reflected.

"I don't see what's keeping Sam Morton," mused Captain Rankin, as the team prepared to take the special trolley car. "He met me a little while ago and said he'd be on hand."

"It's early yet," commented the manager. "I guess he'll be on hand. I told him Joe was going to pitch a few innings."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he didn't cut up nearly as much as I thought he would. He said it was only fair to give him a show, but I know Sam is jealous and he won't take any chances

on not being there.”

All of the players, save the regular pitcher, were on hand now and they were anxiously waiting for Sam. One of the inspectors of the trolley line came up to where the boys stood about the special car that was on a siding.

“Say,” began the inspector, “I’ll have to send you boys on your way now.”

“But our special isn’t due to leave for half an hour,” complained Darrell. “We’re waiting for Sam Morton.”

“Can’t help that. I’ve got to start you off sooner than I expected. There’s been a change in the schedule that I didn’t expect, and if I don’t get you off now I can’t for another hour, as the line to Fayetteville will be blocked.”

“That means we’ll be half an hour later than we expected,” said Darrell. “Well, I suppose we’d better go on. Sam can come by the regular trolley, I guess.”

“Sure, he’ll be in Fayetteville in plenty of time,” suggested the inspector. “I’ll be here and tell him about it.”

There was no other way out of it, and soon the team and the substitutes, with the exception of Sam, were on their way. There was quite a crowd already gathered on the Academy grounds when they arrived and they were noisily greeted by their opponents as well as by some of their own “rooters.” The Academy lads were at practice.

“They’re a snappy lot of youngsters,” commented Darrell, as he watched them.

“Yes, we won’t have any walk-over,” said the captain.

The Silver Star lads lost no time in getting into their uniforms. Tom gave Joe’s arm a good rubbing and then he caught for him for a while until Joe announced that, aside from a little soreness, he was all right.

“Try it with Ferguson now,” ordered Darrell, motioning to the regular catcher, and Joe did so, receiving compliments from the backstop for his accuracy.

“A little more speed and you’ll have ’em guessing,” said the catcher genially. “But don’t strain yourself.”

The minutes ticked on. Several of the regular cars had come in from Riverside but there was no sign of Sam Morton. Darrell and Captain Rankin held an earnest conversation.

“What do you suppose is keeping him?” asked the manager.

“I can’t imagine. Unless he is deliberately staying away to throw the game.”

“Oh, Sam wouldn’t do that. He’s too anxious to pitch. We’ll wait a few more

cars.”

“And if he doesn’t come?”

Darrell shrugged his shoulders and looked over to where Joe was practicing with Bart Ferguson.

Chapter 23: Joe In The Box

“Well, when are you fellows going to start?” asked Tony Johnson, captain of the Academy nine, as he ceased his catching practice with Ed. Wilson, the pitcher. “The game ought to have been called ten minutes ago.”

“Our pitcher isn’t here,” said Darrell anxiously. “We’re expecting him every minute. If you could wait a little longer——”

“Haven’t you any one else you can put in?” asked Ferd Backus, the manager. “I saw some one practicing a while ago.”

“He isn’t our regular pitcher,” said George Rankin, “but if Sam doesn’t come we’ll have to lead off with him.”

Joe had been aware that Sam was not on hand. He looked up as car after car passed the grounds, thinking to see Sam enter, for the electric vehicles from Riverside ran close to the Academy diamond.

“I suppose they’ll put Parnell in at the start,” Joe mused, naming the second baseman who sometimes acted as pitcher for the Stars. Joe did not dare hope that he himself would be chosen.

“Well, how much longer?” demanded Johnson, when two more cars had passed and Sam was on neither of them. “We want to finish this game before dark.”

“All right,” assented Darrell briskly. “Get your men ready, Rankin.”

“But who will pitch?”

“Joe Matson, of course. It’s the only thing we can do. Take the field, fellows. Joe, take your place in the box!”

“Who—me?” gasped our hero, unable to believe the words.

“Yes, you,” and Darrell smiled. “Do your prettiest now. You’re going in at the beginning instead of at the end. It’s different from what I planned, but I guess I can depend on you. Hold ’em down!”

“I will!” cried Joe fiercely and he forgot his injured arm.

“Play ball!” ordered the umpire and Joe took his place as pitcher for the Silver

Stars for the first time. No wonder his heart beat faster than usual. The Stars were to bat last, Rankin having won the toss. It must be remembered that these boys were amateur players and did not always follow league rules of having the home team up last.

The usual number of practice balls were allowed between Joe and the catcher at the plate and Bart noted with satisfaction that Joe was cool and steady and that he did not try for speed.

Then the first man for the Academy—their best hitter—faced our hero. Bart gave the signal for a slow straight ball over the plate at an angle. It was the beginning of a cross-fire which he and Joe had quickly agreed upon, and, as is well known, the ability of a pitcher to deliver a good cross-fire wins many games. Cross-firing is merely sending the ball first over one side of the plate then the other and then right over centre. Joe had done it in practice. Could he do it in the game?

“Strike one!” called the umpire, when the first ball found lodgment in Bart’s big glove. There was a little gasp of protest from the Academy crowd, but they said nothing. Their man had not struck at the ball, but it had been in the right place and Joe knew he had a fair umpire with whom to deal.

His next delivery was a ball, but the third was a strike though the man had not moved his bat.

“Hit it—hit it!” pleaded his friends.

The batter swung fiercely at the next ball and knocked a little pop fly which Bart gathered in and one man was down.

“Do it again!” called Darrell to his pitcher, and Joe smiled. His arm pained him a little, but he gritted his teeth and delivered the next man a strike, for the batter missed it cleanly. He was not so lucky in his following trial, for the batter got to first mainly because of an error in the play of Fred Newton, at short, who fumbled the pick-up and delayed in getting the ball to Darrell.

Joe succeeded in striking out the third man up, though the one who had gone to first managed to steal second. There were now two out and a man on the middle bag when Joe faced his fourth opponent. He tried for a slow out but something went wrong and the man hit for two sacks, bringing in the run. But that was all, for the next batter fell for some slow, easy balls and fanned the air.

The Academys had one run and it looked a trifle disheartening to the Silver Stars until they came up and found that the pitcher opposed to them was very weak. They hammered him pretty badly in the last half of the first, and three runs were credited to them ere they had to take the field again.

“Not so bad; eh?” asked Rankin of Darrell.

"Fine, if Joe can only keep it up. How's your arm?" he asked him.

"Fine!" exclaimed our hero, but in truth it pained him considerably in spite of the treatment Tom Davis gave it.

The Academy team didn't get a run in the second inning though Joe was found for some short, scattering hits. A man got to second and one to third, mainly through errors in the outfield force, one bad one being furnished by Tom, who was at centre in Joe's place.

"But we'll forgive you for getting Joe's arm in shape," said the manager with a smile.

In their half of the second the Stars got two runs, and succeeded in forcing another goose egg on their opponents in the home team's half of the third. Joe did not do so well this time, for he was beginning to tire and only a brace on the part of his supporting players saved him from having a number of runs come in on his errors.

One run for the Stars marked their efforts in the third and when the fourth inning began it looked as if it was a foregone conclusion that the visiting team would go home with the scalp of their enemy. But Joe could not keep up the pace he had set for himself. No young and inexperienced pitcher could, much less one with a sore arm.

The muscles ached very much in spite of all Tom could do with rubbing in the liniment, but Joe gritted his teeth and keep his place in the pitcher's box. He knew he dared not give in. Only two runs were earned, however, though he was pretty badly pounded, and this only made the score three to six in favor of the Stars, when their half of the fourth came. But they were unable to better it for the Academy lads took a brace after an earnest appeal by their captain and manager.

"Make 'em take a goose egg!" yelled the student lads to their friends, and the Stars were forced to be content with this.

In the fifth inning neither side scored, Joe holding his own well, and only allowing one hit, which amounted to nothing. And in the sixth when, with only three scattered hits, not a run was chalked up for the home team, Darrell ran over to Joe and cried:

"Fine, old man! Can you keep it up?"

"I—I'm going to!" burst out Joe, though he had to grit his teeth to keep back an expression of pain when he moved his pitching arm.

Chapter 24: Sam Arrives

Whether the Stars were determined to show their opponents what they could do when they tried or whether it was because they wanted to show their confidence in Joe, or even whether it was due to a slump in the playing of the Academy team, was not made manifest, but at any rate in their half of the sixth inning our friends gathered in four runs, making the score ten to three in their favor.

"Oh, it's a walk-over," boasted Tom Davis as he did an impromptu war dance.

"Yes, we've got 'em beat a mile," added Seth Potter.

"Don't be too sure," commented the Academy captain. "No game is won until it's over and we've got three more innings yet. The seventh is always our lucky number."

"You're welcome to all you can get," rejoined Captain Rankin with a laugh. "Seven is where we always eat pie, too."

The Stars were about to take the field for the beginning of the seventh when there was a commotion over at one entrance gate. A lad came running through the crowd.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Wait! I'm going to play. Let me pitch!"

"Sam Morton!" burst out Tom Davis. "Why couldn't he stay away until we had the game won? I'll bet we slump as soon as he goes in the box."

Sam came on running. He was panting and out of breath.

"What's the matter? Where were you?" demanded Darrell.

"I got on—the wrong car. I thought it—came here. They—took me off—in the woods—somewhere. I've had an awful time—getting here. Is the game—over?"

"No, we're just starting the seventh."

"Can't I pitch?"

Darrell hesitated. It was a perfectly natural request for Sam and yet Joe had been doing so well that both the manager and the captain disliked to take him off the mound.

"Can't I pitch?" again demanded Sam. "You don't mean to tell me that Joe Matson has——"

"Joe hasn't done anything but what we wanted him to," put in Rankin quickly, "and he's made a good record."

"Oh, I suppose so," sneered Sam. "Well, if you don't want me to——"

"Of course you can pitch," said Darrell quietly. It was unquestioningly Sam's right and though he was in rather an exhausted condition still the manager and captain knew that he was at his best early in his game.

"What are you going to do; change pitchers?" demanded the manager of the Academy team, striding up to Darrell and Captain Rankin.

"Yes."

"You can't do it now."

"Why not?"

"It's against the rules. You've got to have some one bat for him first. You can't change until next inning."

There was quite a mix-up, and rules were quoted and mis-quoted back and forth, for, as I have said, the lads were far from being professional or even college players. The upshot of it was that Sam was allowed to go in, whether or not in accordance with the rules the boys did not decide, and the little feeling that had been raised soon subsided, for they were all true sportsmen.

As for Joe, at first he felt humiliated that he was displaced but he realized that he had had more honor than he had at first expected, and his arm was beginning to pain him very much. So, on the whole, he was glad Sam had arrived when he did.

Not so the captain, manager and other Star players, however, for Sam allowed two runs while he occupied the box, and the Academy team and their friends were jubilant.

The Stars managed to get two runs in their half of the seventh. Joe did not play, his place at centre field continuing to be filled by Tom. Joe was glad of the rest and he watched the efforts of his rival closely.

In the eighth Sam did not seem able to pull himself together and three runs were due to his poor pitching.

"Say, if we play innings enough we'll beat 'em even with their new pitcher!" called some one in the crowd, anxious to get Sam's "goat," or nerve.

And this seemed likely. In their half of the eighth the Stars only got one run, and when the ninth inning opened there were some anxious hearts among the members of the visiting team.

And then came a terrible slump. Sam grew wild, allowed bases on balls, struck one man and muffed an easy fly. When the rout and riot were over there were five runs to the credit of the schoolboy players and they had tied the score, pulling up from a long way in the rear. The crowd went wild for them.

"Fellows, we've got to make our half of this inning count," said Darrell earnestly. "They're making fools of us and they're not in our class at all. We've got to beat them! Sam, wake up!" he said sharply.

"I'm not asleep!" retorted the pitcher. "If you think I am why don't you send that Matson in again?"

"Easy now, easy," spoke Rankin. "You can pitch if you pull yourself together, and if we can't make a run this inning and it goes to the tenth you'll have to unwind some curves."

"I will, but it won't go to the tenth."

It didn't, for the Stars took a brace and pulled off one run, winning the game by a score of fourteen to thirteen. But it had been a close call.

"Well, you beat us," acknowledged the Academy manager as the winning run came in. "But it took two pitchers to do it, and you'd have done better if you'd stuck to the first one."

"Perhaps," admitted Darrell. "You played better than I gave you credit for."

"Why don't you use that first pitcher regularly?" the home captain wanted to know.

"Oh, maybe——" began Darrell, and then he saw Sam standing close beside him, and he did not finish.

"What were you going to say?" demanded Sam roughly.

"Nothing," answered the manager in some confusion. He was saved a further reply by the approach of a boy who held a note in his hand.

"Is Joe Matson here?" the lad asked.

"Right over there," said Darrell, pointing to where the young pitcher was talking to Tom Davis.

"I've got a letter for him," the messenger went on.

Joe rapidly tore open the envelope and read the few words the note contained.

"I've got to leave here," he said to Tom.

"Why? What's the matter? Nothing wrong I hope."

"I don't know," answered Joe. "The note says I'm to come home at once. They've sent a carriage for me. I hope nothing has happened to—to anybody," and gulping down a suspicious lump in his throat Joe followed the lad off the diamond.

Chapter 25: Joe Foils The Plotters

There was a carriage waiting just outside the ball grounds, a carriage drawn by one horse. A man whom Joe had never seen before, so far as he knew, held the reins.

"There's the man who wants you," explained the lad who had acted as messenger.

"Who is he?" asked the young pitcher quickly. "I don't know him. Where did he come from? Where did you meet him?"

"I guess he'll tell you all you want to know," said the lad. "All I know is that I was standing outside the ball grounds after the game, and he give me that note to bring in to you. I didn't come with him."

"Oh, I see," replied Joe, but he was wondering who the man was, and how the fellow came to know that he was in Fayetteville.

"Hope I didn't take you away from the game," began the man with what he evidently meant for a pleasant smile. Yet, somehow Joe did not like that smile. The man seemed to have a shifty glance and Joe mistrusted him.

"Oh, the game is over," answered the young pitcher. "I didn't play in the last part. But what is the matter? Is my mother or father ill?"

"It's nothing serious," spoke the man. "No one is ill. I came to get you about your father's patents."

"Oh!" exclaimed Joe. He felt a sensation of relief until he realized the danger that threatened his father's inventions. Then he asked: "What's wrong? Is Mr.——" Then he stopped for he did not know whether or not to mention names to this stranger.

"I can't give you any particulars," said the man with another smile. "All I can say is that they engaged me to come and get you to save time."

"Who engaged you?" asked Joe.

"Your father," replied the man. "He sent me off in a hurry and said I'd find you at this game. I sent you in the note by the lad. Your father had no time to write one, but you are to go to him at once. He wants you to help him about the patent models I think. We'd better hurry."

Joe's suspicions vanished at once. He knew his father was preparing to send on some models to Washington and now probably some need of haste had arisen necessitating his aid. He climbed up into the carriage, and though he noted at

the time that the rig did not seem to be from the local livery stable, which had only a few, he thought nothing of it then.

The man flicked the horse with the whip and the animal started off on the jump. Just outside the ball grounds there was a private road leading into the main one. On reaching the chief thoroughfare the man turned north whereas, to reach Riverside, he should have gone south.

"Hold on!" cried Joe, "you're going the wrong way."

"Be easy. It's all right," answered the man with a smile. "Your father has taken all his things to a little shop in Denville. He had to have some changes made in the models I believe, and he wanted to be in a machine shop where he could work quietly. He told me to bring you there."

Joe remembered that on one or two occasions Mr. Matson had had some work done in Denville, and once more the suspicions that had arisen were lulled. Joe sank back on the cushions and began thinking of the game just played. His arm was getting quite stiff.

"I'll have to attend to it as soon as I get home," he mused. "It won't do to have it go back on me just when things are in such good shape. If they keep on I may become the regular pitcher. Sam certainly did poorly in his part of the game, and I'm not getting a swelled head, either, when I say that." Joe knew he had done good work, considering his sore arm, and he made up his mind to do still better.

The man drove along rapidly, and in about an hour had reached the outskirts of Denville. He turned down a road that was evidently little used, to judge by the grass growing in it, and halted the horse in front of a small building. It did not look like a place where inventors' models would be made. In fact the shack had a forlorn and forsaken air about it, and Joe looked curiously at it. His suspicions were coming back.

"Where is my father?" he demanded. "I don't see him."

"It's all right now—it's all right," said the man quickly. "Hello in there!" he called.

The next instant Joe saw a face at the window. Then it disappeared, but that momentary glance had showed him it was the face of Mr. Isaac Benjamin. In a second it was all clear to him. He had been trapped. He attempted to spring from the carriage seat.

"I'm on to your game!" he exclaimed to the man.

"Oh, are you? Well, you're not going to get away!" and with that the man grabbed Joe around the waist, pinning his arms to his sides. Then from the little building came running Mr. Benjamin and Mr. Holdney.

"Did you get him all right?" asked the manager of the harvester works eagerly.

"I certainly did," panted the other man, for Joe was struggling to get loose. "Didn't give me any trouble either, until just now."

"Well, I'll make lots of trouble for you, if you don't let me go!" cried Joe.

"Now, young man, take it easy," advised Mr. Benjamin. "We don't intend to do you a bit of harm, and we only brought you to this place to have a quiet talk with you. It's in your father's interest and I hope you'll overlook the unconventional way we took to get you here. Bring him in," he added to the man in the carriage and, despite Joe's struggles he was lifted out and carried into the little building. The door was shut and locked, and he was alone with his three captors.

"What do you want of me?" hotly demanded the lad.

"Now don't get excited and we'll tell you," said Mr. Benjamin. "It's about your father's patents."

"Yes," broke in Mr. Holdney, "we want to know where they are. He had no right to take the papers and models away from the harvester works. Those inventions are the property of the company and aren't your father's at all. We want——"

"Better let me talk to him," advised Mr. Benjamin. "Now Joe, you can't understand all the ins and outs of this business, for it's very complicated. You know that your father is working on certain patents about a corn reaper and binder; don't you?"

"Yes," admitted Joe cautiously, "but I'm not going to tell you anything about it."

"Perhaps you will after you hear all I have to say," went on Mr. Benjamin. "Now, it's like this: Your father is unduly alarmed about the safety of his rights in the patents, and I will admit that he has some rights. For some reason he saw fit to take his models and papers away from the shop at the harvester works where he was engaged on them."

Joe smiled—well he knew why his father had removed the valuable models and papers.

"What we want," said Mr. Benjamin, "is to get access to those models. We want to see them for a short time, and also look over the papers. Now you can fix that for us if you will."

"Why don't you ask my father?" inquired Joe.

"We have, but——" began Mr. Holdney.

"He won't listen to reason," put in Mr. Benjamin. "He thinks we would deprive him of his rights." Joe thought so too, but he said nothing. "Now if you can

quietly get those models and papers and let us have a look at them they will be returned to you without fail," said the manager. "Your father's rights will be fully protected. It may seem strange to you for us to make this proposition in this way, and bring you here as we have done, but it was necessary."

"Suppose I refuse?" asked Joe.

"Then we'll——" began Mr. Holdney, in blustering tones.

"Now, now, easy," cautioned Mr. Benjamin. "The consequences may be disastrous for your father," he said quietly. "I am doing this for his own good. He will not hear of showing the models, but if you can get them for us it will save much trouble and annoyance for—well, for all of us. If you don't, your father may lose all he possesses and be without a position. I know what inventors are. They can only see one thing at a time. It is a simple thing that we ask of you. Will you do it? Now, you needn't answer at once. Take a little time to think it over. Go in that room there and wait. We'll give you half an hour. If by that time you don't decide to help us we'll——"

"We'll make you!" exclaimed Mr. Holdney. "I've got too much money tied up in this to see it lost by the obstinacy of a boy."

"Well, if you refuse, we will have to take other measures," said Mr. Benjamin, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Joe's heart was beating fast. He did not know what to do. Being practically kidnapped after he had worked so hard in the game, his fears for his father aroused, it is no wonder that he could not think clearly. He welcomed the chance to go off quietly by himself, but never for a moment did he think of betraying his father. Only for an instant did he place any confidence in what the wily manager had said. Then he knew there must be a trick in it all.

"But if I let them trap me it's my own fault," thought Joe. "I've got to think up some way of escape."

"Well?" asked the manager as Joe hesitated.

"I—I'll think it over," answered the young pitcher.

"All right. You can go in that room," and Mr. Benjamin opened the door of an apartment leading out of the main one.

Joe cast a quick glance about it as the door closed behind him. He noted that it was not locked, but that with three men in the outer room the boy knew he could not escape that way.

"And I'm going to escape if I can," he told himself. "I don't need any more time to think over what I'm going to do. They shan't have a glance at dad's models

and papers.”

A rapid survey of the room showed him that it had but one window and that was heavily barred. He raised the sash softly and tried the bars. They were rusty but held firmly in the wood.

“No use trying that way,” murmured Joe. He heard the hum of voices in the outer room and listened at the keyhole.

“Don’t you think he can get away?” he heard the man who had brought him to the place ask the others.

“I don’t believe he’ll try,” was the answer from Mr. Benjamin. “After all, we couldn’t hope to keep him a prisoner long. There would be too much hue and cry over it. All I expect is that he’ll be so worried and frightened that he’ll tell us what we want to know.”

“Oh, you’ve got another think coming,” whispered Joe.

He walked back to the window once more and, as he crossed the room he saw what looked like a trap door in the floor. Kneeling down he applied his nose to the crack. There came up the damp, musty smell of a cellar.

“That’s it!” cried Joe. “If I can get that door up I can drop into the cellar even if there aren’t any stairs, and I guess I can get out of the cellar. But can I get that door up?”

There was no ring to lift it by, and no handle, but Joe was a resourceful lad and in an instant his knife was out. With the big blade inserted in the crack he managed to raised the door a trifle. He endeavored to hold the advantage he had gained until he could take out the knife blade and insert it again farther down, but the door slipped through his fingers.

“I’ve got to get some way of holding it up after each time I pry,” he thought. A hurried search through his pockets brought to light part of a broken toe plate. He had had a new one put on for the Academy game, and had thrust the broken piece in the pocket of his trousers.

“This ought to do it,” he reasoned, and it did, for with the aid of that Joe was able to hold up and raise the trap door. The damp, musty smell was stronger now, and Joe was glad to see, in the dim darkness of the cellar, a flight of steps. “They’re pretty rotten, but I guess they’ll hold me,” he murmured.

The next instant he was going down them, and he let the trap door fall softly into place over his head. It was so dark in the cellar now that he could see nothing, but when his eyes became accustomed to the blackness he saw the dim light of an outer window.

It was the work of but a moment to scramble through it, and a few seconds later Joe was running away from the place of his brief captivity.

"I guess I won't give you an answer to-day," he murmured as he looked back.

He heard a shout and saw Mr. Benjamin rush out. Then our hero caught sight of the horse and carriage and like a flash he made for it. Jumping in he called to the animal and was soon galloping down the road while the shouts behind him became fainter and fainter.

"This is the time I fooled you!" cried Joe exultantly, as he urged on the horse.

Chapter 26: Sam Resigns

"Those desperate men! You must have them arrested at once!" exclaimed Mrs. Matson when Joe, a little later, had reached home, having left the horse and carriage at the local livery stable to be claimed. "You ought to go to the police at once, John! Why think of what might have happened to Joe," for the boy had told the whole story.

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," said Joe who, now that the excitement was over, and he had so completely turned the tables on the plotters, was rather inclined to laugh at the experience.

"There are worse things than that done to get possession of valuable patents," said Mr. Matson. "Those men are evidently desperate, though why Mr. Holdney should turn against me I cannot understand. But I would rather wait, and take no action right away. My work is almost finished and if all goes well I shall soon be independent of the harvester people. If, however, there is a slip-up I will be dependent on my position for a living. I think I will wait and see what develops."

But in the morning there was a new turn to affairs. It was announced at the harvester factory that Mr. Benjamin had gone away for an indefinite stay, and a new manager had his place. This made it unnecessary for Mr. Matson to say anything. He wrote a strong letter of protest to Mr. Holdney, and then worked harder than ever to get his patents in shape so he would be fully protected in them.

As for Joe he said nothing to any of his chums about his experience. The rig was claimed later by a man who would not give his name, and who drove off hurriedly, as if he feared arrest.

"And now I'm going to get back to baseball," announced the young pitcher.

His arm got better rapidly after the Academy game, and he was soon pitching in

practice with his former vim and vigor. He was now regarded as the regular substitute twirler for the Silver Stars.

Sam Morton, too, was regular in his practice, and there seemed to be something different about him. He was more careful in his conduct, and not as surly as he had been. He accepted criticism in a better spirit, and in one game against the scrub he did such unusually excellent work that the manager complimented him.

"Just keep that up on Saturday," said Darrell, "and we won't let the Fairdale Blues have a run."

"Oh, I'll be there with the goods all right," boasted Sam. He glanced at Joe as he said this as much as to intimate that his rival would not get a chance in the box.

The Fairdale Blues were a strong team, and, as they had beaten the Stars several times, and had also won from the Resolutes, who were considered the strongest team in the county, more than the usual interest attached to the coming contest.

It was to be played on the Stars' grounds, and early on the day of the game the grandstand and bleachers began to fill. The Blues arrived in several big carryalls with a noisy crowd of "rooters" carrying horns, bells and clappers—anything with which to make a racket.

"They'll get Sam's goat if he isn't careful," observed Rodney Burke, when the Stars went out to practice.

"Don't you fool yourself," retorted Sam. "I'm going to pitch a no-hit no-run game to-day."

"That's like Sam—boasting as usual," commented Rodney.

"Well, I think he'll make good," said an admirer of the pitcher.

"Wait until you see what kind of hitters the Blues have," cautioned Rodney. "They may knock Sam out of the box. Then if Joe goes in——"

"Aw, Joe won't get a chance to-day," was the retort. "He hasn't had enough practice."

"Look what he did to the Academy team," reminded Rodney.

And then further talk was stopped, for the gong rang to clear the diamond. The game was about to begin.

The Stars took the field, for they were to bat last, and Sam faced his first opponent with a smile of confidence on his face. It faded away a moment later, however, as the lad knocked as pretty a three bagger as had been seen on the grounds in many a day.

"That's the stuff!"

"Line 'em out!"

"Oh, we're on to his curves all right!" yelled the crowd. Joe, who was on the bench as a reserve pitcher, jumped to his feet and watched the ball roll past Tom who was playing centre. It looked almost as if the batter would come on home, but he held third and the fears of the Stars subsided.

"Fool him now, Sam," called Darrell to the pitcher.

"Make him give you a nice one," was the advice the next batter got from his friends. And he did, though it was only good for one bag. However, the run came in, and there were gloomy hearts in the camp of the Silver Stars.

Sam managed to strike out the next man, and his confidence came back. But it was only for a short time. The crowd of Blue "rooters" was making a terrific racket and this may have gotten on Sam's nerves, at any rate he gave the next man his base on balls and was later hit for two two baggers.

"Oh, we've got his goat! We've got 'em going! Everybody take a run!" yelled the visiting captain, jumping up and down at the third base coaching line.

Darrell ran over to Sam.

"You've got to pull yourself together," he said quickly. "We can't afford to lose this game."

"I'm doing the best I can," retorted Sam. "The ball slips."

"Don't let it slip—slips are dangerous," said the manager sharply. "You've got to do better or——"

"Play ball!" yelled the umpire and Darrell ran back to his place at first base. Sam scowled at him, and then wound up for his next delivery.

Somehow they managed to get three out, but there were five runs in the Blue frame when that inning ended, and only two for the Stars.

"We can't stand this," said Rankin to the manager.

"No, if Sam doesn't improve this inning I'm going to put in Joe."

"Sam will raise a row."

"I don't care if he does. Why doesn't he pitch decent ball if he wants to hold his place? They're laughing at the Stars now, and they didn't used to."

"I know it. Well, maybe he'll improve."

But Sam didn't. He could not seem to control the ball, his curves broke just

about where the batters wanted them and they knocked out three runs that inning.

"Matson bats for Morton!" announced the umpire when it came the turn of the Stars and the change had been mentioned to the score keepers by Darrell.

"What does that mean?" cried Sam, striding to where the captain and manager sat.

"It means that Joe is going to pitch the rest of this game," was the quiet answer.

"He is?" Sam's voice rose high in anger.

"He certainly is. You can't seem to do it, Sam. I'm sorry, but we can't afford to lose. We're near the tail end of the league now."

Sam shot a look at the captain. Rankin nodded his head to confirm what the manager had said. Then the deposed pitcher strode over to where the score keepers sat. Taking up a piece of paper and a pencil he rapidly wrote something and handed it to Darrell.

"What's this?" asked the manager.

"My resignation from the Silver Star Baseball Club," snapped Sam. "I'm done pitching for you. It was all a put-up job to get me out, and that Matson lad in. I'm through," and he turned aside.

"Very well," assented Darrell quietly. "If you feel that way about it perhaps it is better that you quit. But I'm sorry."

"Play ball!" yelled the umpire.

"Joe, bat for Sam and then take the box," said the manager, and there was a little subdued applause from the other Star players on the bench. It was their way of congratulating Joe.

Chapter 27: Bad News

Joe was plainly nervous. Being called on so suddenly had its effect as did the unexpected action of Sam in resigning because Joe had supplanted him. But the young pitcher knew that he must pull himself together.

The game was slipping away from the Stars and the crowd of shouters that accompanied the Blues would redouble their efforts to get Joe's "goat" as soon as he got in the box.

He had a foretaste of what they would do when he got up to bat in Sam's place and struck out. It was no discredit to Joe, for the Blues had a fine pitcher, still it

added to his nervousness.

"If that's a sample of what your new pitcher can do we'll take a few more runs!" yelled a Blue sympathizer.

"Oh, he only did that for fun!" yelled Rodney.

"Yes," added Tom Davis. "He's saving his arm to strike you fellows out. Go to it, Joe! Don't let 'em rattle you."

The Stars took a brace, whether it was the knowledge that Joe was to pitch or not, but they certainly braced, and in that inning got enough runs to make the score six to eight in favor of the visiting team.

"Now, Joe, hold 'em down!" pleaded Darrell, "and we can do the rest, I think."

"I'll try," answered our hero.

It would be too much to expect Joe to do wonders, but he did very well. He only allowed two hits in the inning when he first pitched and only one run came in, chiefly through an error on the part of the third baseman.

"I guess we've got their number now," exulted Darrell, when it came the turn of the Stars to bat. "Keep up the good work, boys. We've got 'em going."

The Stars managed to knock out two runs in their half of the third inning and that made the score eight to nine—one extra tally only against them.

And then began what was really a remarkable game for one played between amateur nines. For the next four innings neither side got a run. Talk of a "pitchers' battle" began to be whispered, and for the credit of the visitors be it said that they no longer tried to get Joe's "goat."

Both pitchers were on their mettle. Of course they were not perfect and probably some deliveries that the umpire called strikes were balls, just as some that he designated as balls were good strikes. But it was all in the game. Joe was doing good work. There were only a few scattered hits off him and these were easily taken care of by the in or out fielders. In this the Blues rather excelled, however, there being more errors charged up against the home team than to them.

But the Stars had this in their favor; that, while there were a number of good stick men among the visitors, they were not speedy base-runners and thus a number of men were nabbed on the sacks, through playing off too far, or not connecting in time, who otherwise might have brought in runs.

"Oh, fellows, we've got to do something!" cried the captain at the close of the usual lucky seventh, when no runs had been registered for either side. "Can't some of you pull off a run?"

But it was the Blue team who scored first, getting one run on a ball hit by the first man up. It was manifestly a foul, but the umpire called it fair and the man held his base. Then Joe's arm gave him a twinge and he was hit for a three bagger by the next man up, scoring the player preceding him. But that was all.

With grimly tightened lips Joe faced his next opponent and after that not a man got to first, and the player on third dared not steal home, so keenly was he watched.

With the score eight to ten against them the Stars came in more confidently than might have been expected. And when they had hammered out two runs, tying the score, there was wild enthusiasm.

"Here's where we walk away from them!" yelled Rodney, as the second run came in, and with only one man out. But there came a slump and the opposing pitcher braced up, striking out two men in succession.

The ninth inning saw a single run tallied up for the visitors, and in this connection Joe did some great work, pulling down a fly that was well over his head and receiving a round of applause for his pluck, for it was a "hot" one.

The unexpected happened in the ending of the ninth, when the visitors were one ahead. Seth Potter, never reckoned as a heavy hitter brought in a home run, and the score was once more a tie for no one else crossed home plate.

"Ten innings!" was the cry and the spectators began "sitting up and taking notice" as Rodney Burke said.

"Now, Joe, it's up to you to shut them out," advised the captain. The young pitcher nodded and then he cut loose.

His arm was paining him very much for by a sudden twist he had wrenched the muscles injured in saving the lad from the trolley car. But Joe would not give up, and he struck out three men neatly, only one, the second up, getting any kind of a hit, and that only good for the initial bag.

"A goose egg!" yelled Rodney Burke. "Now one run will do the trick!"

"Snow 'em under!" cried Darrell.

And the Stars did, for they rapped out the necessary run amid a jubilant riot of cheers, making the final score twelve to eleven.

"Oh, I knew you could do it! I knew you could!" cried the captain, trying to embrace all his lads at once. They had won handily though at one time it looked like defeat.

"Good work, Joe," complimented Darrell. "You're the regular pitcher from now on."

"But if Sam reconsiders his resignation?"

"He can't," rejoined the manager. "He's out for good."

Joe could hardly wait to get home and tell the good news. He fairly raced into the house, but he stopped short at the sight of his father and mother in the dining room. They were seated at the table and a look of anxiety was on their faces.

"What's the matter?" gasped Joe, all his joy in the victory and his new position leaving him as he looked at his parents. On the table between them lay a number of papers.

"I've been served with a summons from the court," said Mr. Matson slowly. "It's a move on the part of Benjamin and Holdney. The court has taken my patent models and documents away from me, and I may lose everything. It's hard, just as I was about to succeed—very hard."

"And you may lose everything, dad?" asked Joe huskily.

"Yes—everything son—I may have to start all over again. I'm out of the harvester works now."

For a moment one disappointing thought came to Joe. He would not be able to go to a boarding school as he had hoped. Then the look of trouble on his father's face drove all other thoughts from his mind.

"Don't you care, dad!" he exclaimed stepping close to him. "You can beat those fellows yet. We whipped the Blues to-day, and I'm the regular pitcher for the Stars!"

Chapter 28: The Fight

There was a moment of silence following Joe's remark about being made regular pitcher. Then Clara laughed and it was almost a laugh of relief, for she had been under quite a strain since she came in and heard the bad news.

"Oh, you silly boy!" cried Clara. "Just as if your being made pitcher was going to help. I suppose you'll turn all your salary in to help out now; won't you?" but there was no sting intended in her words and, fearing there might have been just the touch of it, she crossed the room and tried to slip her arm up around Joe's neck.

"No, you don't!" he cried as gaily as possible under the circumstances, "fen on kissing. But say, dad, is it as bad as all that? Have Benjamin and his crowd beaten you?"

"I'm afraid so, son. At least they've won the first skirmish in the battle. Now it's

up to the courts, and it may take a year or more to settle the question of whether or not I have any rights in the inventions I originated. But don't let that worry you," he went on more cheerfully. "We'll make out somehow. I'm glad you got the place you wanted. How was the game?"

"Pretty good. It was so tight we had to play ten innings. But can't I do something to help you, dad?"

"We can't do anything right away," rejoined Mr. Matson. "We can only wait. I shall have to see a lawyer, and have him look after my interests. I never thought that Mr. Benjamin and Mr. Holdney would treat me this way.

"But don't worry. Perhaps we shall come out all right, and in the end this may be a good thing. It will teach me a lesson never again to trust any one where patents are concerned. I should have had a written contract and not taken their mere word that they would treat me right."

"And you are out of the harvester works?" asked Joe.

"Out completely," and Mr. Matson smiled. "I have a holiday, Joe, and I'm coming to see you pitch some day."

"But—but," ventured Clara, "if you haven't any work, dad, you won't get any money and——"

"Oh, so that's what is worrying you!" cried her father with a laugh as he placed his arm around her. "Well, have no fears. There are still a few shots in the locker, and we're not going to the poorhouse right away. Now, Joe, tell us all about the ball game."

Which the young pitcher did with great enthusiasm.

"But won't this Sam Morton be angry with you?" asked Mrs. Matson, who was a gentle woman, always in fear of violence.

"Oh, I don't suppose he'll be very friendly toward me," replied Joe.

"Then he may do you some injury."

"Well, I guess I can take care of myself. I'm not afraid of him, mother, and if it comes to a fight——"

"Oh, you horrid boys—always thinking about fighting!" interrupted Clara. "Don't you fight, Joe!"

"I won't if I can help it, sis."

Next morning, Joe was in two states of mind. He was delighted at being the regular pitcher for the Stars, but he was downcast when he thought that to go to the boarding school was now out of the question. And that it would be impossible

for him to think of it under the present financial state of the family was made plain to him when he spoke of the matter to his mother.

"I'm sorry, Joe," she said, "but you'll have to give up the idea."

"All right," he answered, as cheerfully as he could, but he went out of the house quickly for there was a suspicious moisture in his eyes, and a lump in his throat that would not seem to go down, no matter how hard he swallowed.

"Oh, I'm a chump!" he finally exclaimed. "I shouldn't want to go to an expensive boarding school when dad is in such trouble. And yet—and yet—Oh! I do want to get on a big team and pitch!"

In the days that followed Joe saw little of his father, for Mr. Matson was out of town trying to get matters in shape for the court proceedings. But Joe was kept busy at practice with the Stars, and in playing games.

The season was in full swing and the Silver Stars seemed to have struck a streak of winning luck. Some said it was Joe's pitching, for really he was doing very well. Others laid it just to luck and talked darkly of a "slump."

"There won't be any slump if you fellows keep your eyes open, and hit and run," said the manager.

The county league season was drawing to a close, and as it stood now the championship practically lay between the Stars and their old enemies the Resolutes. There was some talk of playing off a tie, if it should come to that, but when Darrell mentioned this to the Resolute manager he was told that the latter team had all dates filled to the end of the season.

"We can't give you a game," he announced.

"It's too bad," said Darrell, "for we ought to decide which is the best team."

"Oh, ours is, of course. Didn't we wallop you once?"

"Well, you can't do it again," was the quick retort.

It was several days after this when Joe was coming home from afternoon practice in preparation for a game Saturday with the Red Stockings. As he took a short cut over the fields to get home more quickly, he was aware of a figure coming toward him. When too late to turn back he saw it was Sam Morton. Sam saw Joe and came to a halt.

"Well," asked Sam with a sneer, "how is the high-and-mighty pitcher? I suppose you've been doing nothing else but handing out no-hit and no-run games?"

"Not quite as good as that," admitted Joe with what he meant for a friendly smile.

“Who you laughing at?” demanded Sam fiercely.

“I wasn’t laughing,” replied Joe.

“Yes, you were! You were laughing at me and I won’t stand it. You worked and schemed to get me out of the nine so you could go in, and now you’re making fun of me, I won’t stand it, I tell you. You think you’re a pitcher! Well you’re not, and you’ll never be. I won’t be made fun of!” All the pent-up anger—unreasoning as it was,—all the hate that had been accumulating for weeks in Sam, burst out at once.

He made a spring for Joe, but the pitcher stepped back. Not in time, however, for he received a blow on the chest.

Now I am not defending Joe for what he did. I am only telling of what happened. Joe was a manly lad yet he had all the instincts and passions that normal lads have. When he was hit his first instinct was to hit back, and he did it in this case.

His left fist shot forward and clipped Sam on the chin. The blow was a staggering one and for a moment the former pitcher reeled. Then with a roar of rage he came back at Joe, and the pair were at it hammer and tongs.

“I’ll show you that you can’t come sneaking around here and steal my place!” blubbered Sam, as he aimed a blow at Joe’s face.

“I didn’t sneak!” retorted Joe, as he dodged the blow and got a right-hander near Sam’s solar plexus.

Both lads were evenly matched and the fight might have gone on for some time but for Sam’s rage which made him reckless. He left unguarded openings of which Joe took quick advantage, and finally, with a straight left, he sent Sam to the grass.

“I—I’ll fix you for that!” yelled the former pitcher as he rushed at Joe. It was easy to step aside and avoid the clumsy blow, and once more Sam went down. This time he did not get up so quickly, and there was a dazed look on his face.

“See here!” cried Joe, stepping over to him. “This has gone far enough. I didn’t want to fight, but you made me. I can beat you and you know it. If you don’t stop now I’ll knock you down every time you get up until you’ve had enough.”

It was brutal talk, perhaps, but it was well meant. For a moment Sam looked up at his antagonist. Then he murmured:

“I’ve had enough—for the present.”

Chapter 29: The Challenge

The fight was over. Sam arose and started away. Joe called after him:

"Won't you shake hands? I'm sorry this happened, but can't we be friends after this?"

"No!" snarled Sam. "I don't want anything to do with you."

There was nothing more to be said, and Joe walked away. He was somewhat stiff and sore, for a number of Sam's blows had landed with telling effect. One in particular, on the muscles of his right forearm, made that member a bit stiff and numb.

"I've got to take care of that," thought Joe, "or I can't pitch Saturday." He had only a few marks of the fight on his face and he was glad of it, for he did not want his mother or sister to know.

Joe's mother did not ask embarrassing questions. In fact she was thinking of other things, for she had received a letter from her husband that day, sent from a distant city. Matters it appeared were not going as well as they might, but Mr. Matson had hopes that all would come out right in the end.

Joe rubbed his sore arm well that night, and when Saturday came he pitched a great game against the Red Stockings, allowing only a few scattered hits. The Stars took the contest by a big margin.

"Now, if we could wind up with a game against the Resolutes and wallop them we'd finish out the season in great shape," commented Captain Rankin, as he followed his lads off the diamond.

"I'm going to make another try to get them to play us," said Darrell. "I'm going to send a challenge, and intimate that they're afraid to tackle us since we've got our new pitcher."

It was several days later when the nine was at practice and Darrell had not come out. Tom Davis was in his place at first and Rodney Burke was in centre field.

"I wonder what's keeping Darrell?" said the captain. "He hardly ever misses practice."

"Here he comes now," announced Joe, "and he's got a letter," for Darrell was waving a paper as he ran across the field.

"Good news, boys!" he cried. "The Resolutes will play us. I just got word in a special delivery letter. That's what kept me. Hurray! Now we'll show 'em what's what. It will be a grand wind-up for the season and will practically decide the county championship."

"That's the stuff!" cried the lads.

"When do we play?" asked Joe.

"This coming Saturday."

"I thought they said all their dates were filled," commented Tom Davis.

"They were, but some team they counted on busted up and that left an opening. Then, too, I fancy that little dig I gave them about being afraid had its effect. Joe, it's up to you now."

"All right!" and our hero accepted the responsibility with a smile.

There was considerable excitement among the Silver Stars over the prospective game. They were almost too excited to keep on with the practice against the scrub, but Darrell talked like a "Dutch uncle" to them, to quote Rodney Burke, and they went at their work with renewed vigor.

When Joe got home that evening after some hard practice there was another letter from his father. It was brief, merely saying:

"In a few days I will know all. My next will contain good news—or bad."

"Oh, this suspense is terrible," complained Mrs. Matson.

The day of the game between the Silver Stars and their old enemies drew nearer. Joe had practiced hard and he knew he was in good shape to pitch. In fact the Stars were much improved by their season's work, and they were as good an amateur nine in their class as could be found in the country.

Word came to them, however, that the Resolutes were trained to the minute, and were going to put up a stiff fight for the county championship.

"Let 'em," said Darrell briefly. "We don't want a walk-over."

"Well," remarked Clara to her brother, on the Saturday of the game, "isn't it almost time for you to start if you're going to Rocky Ford?"

"Yes, I guess I had better be going," answered Joe. "I want to put a few stitches in my glove. It's ripped."

"I'll do it," offered Clara and she had just finished when the door bell rang.

"I'll go," volunteered Joe, and when he saw a messenger boy standing there, with a yellow envelope in his hands somehow the heart of the young pitcher sank.

Quickly he took the telegram to his mother, to whom it was addressed.

"You open it, Joe," she said. "I can't. I'm afraid it's bad news. My hand trembles

so.”

Joe tore open the telegram. It was from his father.

“I’m afraid it’s all up,” the message read. “I have practically lost my case, and it looks as if I’d have to start all over again. But don’t worry. I’m coming home.”

A silence followed Joe’s reading of the few words aloud. Then indeed it was all over. He could not go to boarding school after all. He looked at his mother. There were tears in her eyes but she bore the shock bravely. Clara was very pale.

“Well, it might be worse!” said Joe philosophically. “There is just a bare chance—but it’s mighty slim.”

And then from outside came the hail of Tom Davis:

“Come on, Joe! Come on! It’s time you started for Rocky Ford. We’re going to wallop the Resolutes!” and with the freedom of an old friend, Joe’s chum burst into the room.

Chapter 30: The Winning Throw—Conclusion

For a moment Tom stood there a bit embarrassed, for he saw that something unusual had happened.

“I—I hope I’m not intruding,” he stammered. “I didn’t think—I came right in as I always do. Has anything—”

“It’s all right!” exclaimed Joe quickly. “We just got word that dad has lost his patent case.”

“Gee! That’s too bad!” exclaimed Tom, who knew something of the affair. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to pitch against the Resolutes, the first thing I do!” cried Joe. “After that I’ll decide what’s next. But is my glove mended, Clara? Come on, Tom, we mustn’t be late. We’re going to wallop them—just as you said.”

“I hope you do!” burst out Clara.

“Play a good game and—and—don’t worry,” whispered Mrs. Matson to her son as he kissed her good-bye.

The team and substitutes were to go to Rocky Ford in two big stages, in time to get in some practice on the grounds that were none too familiar to them. A crowd of Silver Star “rooters” were to follow on the trolley. The captain and managers of the rival teams watched their opponents practice with sharp eyes.

"They're snappier than when they beat us before," was Darrell's conclusion.

"They've got a heap sight better pitcher in Joe than Sam Morton ever was," concluded Captain Hen Littell of the Resolutes, who twirled for his team. "I shouldn't wonder but what we'd have a mighty close game."

The last practice was over. The scattered balls had been collected, the batting list made out and final details arranged. Once more came the thrilling cry of the umpire:

"Play ball!"

The Resolutes were to bat last, and Seth Potter went up to bat first for the Stars.

"Swat it," pleaded the crowd, and Seth smiled. But he fanned the air successively as well as successfully and soon went back to the bench. Then came Fred Newton's turn and he knocked a little pop fly that was easily caught before he reached first. Captain Rankin himself was up next and managed to get to first on a swift grounder that got past the shortstop. But he died on second, for the next man up fanned. No runs for the Stars.

The Resolutes were jubilant, thinking this augured well for them, but they looked a little blank when Joe retired their first two men hitless. For Joe had started off in good form. With the first ball he delivered he knew that he was master of the horsehide—at least for a time.

"But oh! I hope I don't slump!" and he almost found himself praying that such a thing would not happen.

He was in an agony of fear when he heard the crack of the bat on the ball when the third man came up. The spheroid went shooting off in centre field, but by a magnificent stop Percy Parnell gathered it in and the side was retired runless. Things were not so bad for the Stars.

For the next two innings neither side got a run, though there were some scattered hits. Again was there talk of a pitchers' battle, though in the strict sense of the word this was not so, as both Joe and Hen Littell were hit occasionally, and for what would have been runs only for the efficient fielding on both sides.

"See if we can't do something this inning!" pleaded Rankin when his side came up in their half of the fourth. The lads all tried hard and Joe knocked a pretty one that was muffed by the second baseman. However, he quickly picked it up and hurled it to first. Joe got there about the same time as the ball did, and to many he seemed safe, but he was called out.

"Aw, that's rotten!" cried Tom Davis.

"Let it go!" said Darrell sharply, and Tom subsided.

The Stars got another goose egg—four straight—and in their half of the fourth the Resolutes got their first run. The crowd went wild and Joe found himself clenching his hands, for the run came in because he had given a man his base on balls. The runner had successively stolen second and third, and went home on a nice fly.

"I hope I'm not going to slump!" thought Joe and there was a lump in his throat. For an instant he found himself thinking of his father's troubles, and then he firmly dismissed them from his mind. "I've got to pitch!" he told himself fiercely.

"We've got him going!" chanted the Resolute "rooters." Joe shut his teeth grimly and struck out the next man. Then he nipped the runner stealing second and threw him out with lightning speed. That somewhat silenced the jubilant cries and when Joe managed to retire one of the Resolute's heaviest hitters without even a bunt a big crowd rose up and cheered him.

"They're only one ahead," said Rankin as his lads came in to bat. "Let's double it now."

And double it they did, the Star boys playing like mad and getting enough hits off Littell to make two runs.

"That's the way to wallop 'em!" sang some one in the visiting crowd and the song composed for the occasion was rendered with vim.

Desperately as the Resolutes tried in their half of the fifth to catch up to their rivals, they could not do it. Joe was at his best and in that half inning did not allow a hit. He had almost perfect control, and his speed was good. Only once or twice did he pitch at all wild and then it did no harm as there was no one on base.

The sixth inning saw a run chalked up for each team, making the score three to two in favor of the Stars.

"Oh, if we can only keep this up!" exclaimed Darrell, "we'll have them. Can you do it, Joe?"

"I guess so—yes, I can!" he said with conviction.

Then came the lucky seventh, in which the Stars pounded out three runs, setting the big crowd wild with joy, and casting corresponding gloom over the cohorts of the Resolutes. The Stars now had six runs and their rivals were desperate. They even adopted unfair tactics, and several decisions of the umpire were manifestly in their favor. The crowd hooted and yelled, but the young fellow who was calling strikes and balls held to his opinion, and the Resolutes closed their half of the seventh with two runs.

"Six to four in our favor," murmured the Stars' manager. "If we can only keep this lead the game is ours."

"That word 'if' is a big one for only two letters," spoke Captain Rankin grimly. "But maybe we can."

Neither side scored in the eighth and then came the final trial of the Stars unless there should be a tie, which would necessitate ten innings.

Joe was to the bat in this inning, and oh! how hard he tried for a run! He knocked a two bagger and stole third. There was one out when Bart Ferguson came up, and Bart was a heavy hitter. But somehow he did not make good this time. He managed to connect with the ball, however, and as soon as Joe heard the crack he started for home.

But there was brilliant playing on the part of the Resolutes. With a quick throw to home the shortstop nipped Joe at the plate, and then the catcher, hurling the ball to first, got the horsehide into the baseman's hands before Bart arrived. It was a pretty double play and retired the Stars with a goose egg.

Still they had a lead of two runs and they might be able to hold their rivals down. It was a critical point in the game. As Joe took his place and faced the batter he felt his heart wildly throbbing. He knew he must hold himself well in hand or he would go to pieces. The crowd of Resolute sympathizers was hooting and yelling at him. Darrell saw how things might go and ran out to the pitcher.

"Hold hard!" he whispered. "Just take it easy. Pitch a few balls to Bart and your nerve will come back. We've got to win."

"And we will!" exclaimed Joe. The delivery of a few balls, while the batter stepped away from the plate, showed Joe that he still had his speed and control. He was going to be wary what kind of curves he delivered.

He struck out the first man up with an ease that at first caused him wild elation, and then he calmed himself.

"There are two more," he reasoned. "I've got to get two more—two more."

He was almost in despair when he was hit for a two bagger by the next player, and he was in a nervous perspiration about the man stealing to third. Then Darrell signalled him to play for the batter, and Joe did, getting him out with an easy fly.

Then there was a mix-up when the next man hit, and by an error of the left fielder the man on second, who had stolen to third, went home with a run, while the man who had brought him in got to the last bag.

"That's the stuff!" yelled the crowd. "Now one more to make it a tie and another

to win!”

“Steady, boys! Steady!” called Darrell, as he saw his team on the verge of a breakdown. “We can beat ’em!”

There were now two out, one run was in, a man was on third and a heavy batter was up—one of the best of the Resolutes.

“Swat it, Armstrong! Swat it!” cried the crowd, and the big left fielder smiled confidently.

“Ball one!” cried the umpire, after Joe’s first delivery.

There was a gasp of protest from Bart behind the plate, for the sphere had come over cleanly. Darrell signalled to the catcher to make no protest. Joe felt a wave of anger, but he endeavored to keep cool. But when the second ball was called on him he wanted to run up and thrash the umpire. The latter was grinning derisively.

“Here’s a strike!” cried Joe, in desperation and he was gratified when Armstrong struck at it and missed.

“Why didn’t you call that a ball?” asked Bart of the umpire. The latter did not answer.

Another ball was called and then a strike. Now came the supreme moment. Two men out, a man on third waiting to rush in with the tying run, a heavy hitter at bat and three balls and two strikes called on him. No wonder Joe’s hand trembled a little.

“Easy, old man!” called Darrell to him. “You can make him fan.”

Joe thought rapidly. He had studied the batter and he thought that by delivering a swift in-shoot he could fool Armstrong. It was his last chance, for another ball meant that the batter would walk, and there was even a better stick-man to follow.

Joe wound up, and sent in a swift one. His heart was fluttering, he could hardly see, there was a roaring in his ears. And then he dimly saw Armstrong strike at the ball desperately. Almost at the same moment Joe knew he would miss it.

The ball landed in the centre of Bart’s big glove with a resounding whack. He held it exactly where he had caught it. Joe had delivered the winning throw.

“Strike three—batter’s out!” howled the umpire, and then his voice was drowned in a yell of joy from the sympathizers of the Stars.

For their team had won! The Resolutes were retired with but one run in the ninth and the final score was five to six in favor of our friends. They had beaten their

old rivals on their own grounds and they had won the county championship!

"Great work, old man! Great!" yelled Darrell in Joe's ear. "You saved the day for us."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Joe modestly.

"Three cheers for Baseball Joe!" yelled Tom Davis, and how those cheers did ring out.

"Three cheers for the Stars—they beat us fair and square!" called Captain Littell, and this was quite a different ending than that which had marked the previous game.

Some wanted to carry Joe around on their shoulders but he slipped away, and got off his uniform. Soon the team was on its way back to Riverside.

"You ought to be in a bigger team," Darrell told Joe. "You've got the making of a great pitcher in you."

"Well, I guess I'll have to stick around here for a while yet," replied our hero, as he thought of the fallen finances of his father. Never in all his life had he so longed for the chance to go to boarding school, and thence to college. But he knew it could not be, chiefly through the treachery of Benjamin and Holdney. Joe felt a wave of resentment against them sweep over him, and his thoughts were black and bitter.

Tom walked as far as Joe's street with him. He had a silent sympathy that spoke more than mere words could have done.

"So long," he said softly as they parted. "It was a great game, Joe, and I'm almost glad you've got to stay with the Stars."

"Well, did you win?" asked his mother, as Joe entered the house—entered it more listlessly than winning a big game would seem to warrant. "Did you beat the Resolutes, Joe?"

"Yes, we did—why, mother, what's the matter?" cried the young pitcher, for there was a look of joy and happiness on her face, a look entirely different than when he had left her after the bad news. "Has anything—anything good happened?" he asked.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "there has. I just had another telegram from your father. Everything is all right. He gets back his patents."

"No!" cried Joe, as if unable to believe the news.

"But I tell you yes!" repeated Mrs. Matson, and there was joy in her voice. "At first your father believed that all was lost, just as he wired us. Then, most

unexpectedly he tells me, they were able to obtain some evidence from outside parties which they had long tried for in vain.

"It seems that a witness for Mr. Benjamin and his side, on whom they very much depended, deserted them, and went over to your father and his lawyer, and——"

"Hurray for that witness, whoever he was!" cried Joe.

"Be quiet," begged Clara, "and let mother tell."

"There isn't much to tell," went on Mrs. Matson. "With the unexpected evidence of this witness your father's lawyer won the case, almost at the last moment. In fact your father had given up, and was about ready to leave the court when the man sent in word that he would testify for them. That was after your father sent the telegram that came just before you went off to the game, Joe."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Clara.

"Now it's your turn to be quiet and listen," admonished Joe, with a smile at his sister.

"I have about finished," went on their mother. "The judge decided in your father's favor, and he doesn't even have to share the profits of the invention with the harvester company or with Mr. Rufus Holdney, as he at one time thought he would, for they have violated their contract. So we won't be poor, after all, children. Aren't you glad?"

"You bet!" exploded Joe, throwing his arms around his mother's neck.

"And we won't have to leave this nice house," added Clara, looking around the comfortable abode.

"Then I can go to boarding school—and pitch on the school nine; can't I mother?" cried Joe, throwing his arms around her.

"Oh, yes; I suppose so," she answered, with half a sigh. "But I do wish you'd do something else besides play baseball."

"Something else besides baseball, mother! Why, there's nothing to be compared to it. Hurray! I'm going to boarding school! I'm going to boarding school!" and Joe, catching Clara around the waist, waltzed her around the room. Then he caught his mother on his other arm—the arm that won the victory for the Stars that day—and her, too, he whirled about until she cried for mercy.

"Oh, but this is great!" Joe cried when he stopped for breath. "Simply great! I must go and tell Tom. Maybe he can go to boarding school with me."

And whether Tom did or not, and what were our hero's further fortunes on the diamond, will be related in the next volume, to be called: "Baseball Joe on the

School Nine; or, Pitching for the Blue Banner.”

There was an impromptu feast that night for the victorious Silver Stars and Joe was the hero of the occasion. He was toasted again and again, and called upon to make some remarks, which he did in great confusion. But his chums thought it the best speech they had ever heard.

“Three cheers for Baseball Joe!” called Tom Davis, and the room rang with them, while Joe tried to hide his blushes by drinking glass after glass of lemonade.

And now, for a time, we will take leave of him, crying as his chums did after the great victory on the diamond: “Hurrah for Baseball Joe!”

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