

Ralph Henry Barbour



Follow the Ball

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338054951

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CHAPTER I FOR THE TEAM

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

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

The silly part of it was that there was no apparent reason for the estrangement. They had entered Holman's together last fall, and, although they had never chummed much at home, it had seemed natural that they should room together. But it hadn't worked out well. They had managed to get along without a real quarrel, but that was the best that could be said. And now, although no word had been spoken of it, it was mutually understood that next year they should separate. There were moments when Joe regretted it. It did seem that they should have hit it off better. Why hadn't they? He had nothing against Hal; or nothing much. He did think him a bit snobbish, inclined to make too much of the fact that his school friends were of the "smart crowd."

And sometimes he acted “stuck-up” about his playing. Perhaps, though, he had a right to, for he was easily the best man on the team, not even excepting Captain Bob Stearns. As for his trying to get Wilder on second instead of Joe, why, he had a right to his judgment. Still, that rankled.

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

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

Maynard, second floor proctor, began his nightly snooping expedition. However, there were still full three minutes—

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

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

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

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

“Pretend you’re asleep!” whispered Hal.

But Joe, remembering that he was still attired in his underclothes and that he had but the moment before put

the light out, saw the uselessness of that. Instead, he fumbled his way to the door and opened it. The proctor stood revealed in the dim light of the corridor.

“Norwin,” he began.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Naturally."

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

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

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

"Oh, well," he began, "I suppose—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, he was sure it was one of us. If I don’t play Saturday it won’t much matter. If you don’t, it’ll matter a lot. You’re the only one of us who can hit Cross, and unless some one hits him we’re going to get licked. Besides, I didn’t lie to him.”

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

“Wouldn’t expect you to. I didn’t do it for you, so that needn’t worry you. I did it for the team; or the school; or

maybe just because I want to see Munson beaten.”

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

“That doesn’t matter. G’night!”

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

He and Hal had not mentioned last evening’s incident again. For that matter, there had not been many opportunities, for they had seen each other but a few minutes before breakfast. While dressing Hal had seemed morose and out of sorts. After the interview in the office Joe returned to Number 14. He might have gone over to the field and watched practice, and would have done so if he hadn’t funkled the explanations that would have been required of him. There was a bad ten minutes just at dusk when Bob Stearns came in. The captain was hurt rather than angry and said one or two things that made Joe want to crawl under a bed—or weep. But he went away finally, leaving Joe feeling very small and mean, and liking Bob more than ever for the things he might have said and hadn’t. Then there was another knock and Joe’s silence

didn't protect him, for "Granny" Maynard opened the door and descried the lone occupant of the study in the twilight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks," replied the other dryly. "What?"

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

"Rather!" agreed Joe. After Maynard had gone he frowned into the darkness beyond the open window. "He knows. Or he thinks he knows. Well, it doesn't matter. Nothing does—much. I wonder if I told Hal the truth last

night, though. Did I do it for the school or didn't I? Of course I want Holman's to win, but—I don't know! But I'd hate to have him suspect that—that—oh, shucks, that's tommyrot! Why *should* I do it on his account? Of course I didn't! Surly brute!"

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

"Hello. How did practice go?"

"All right, I guess. Wilder played second."

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

"Me? Why?"

"You wanted him there, didn't you?"

"Sure! With you out of it—"

"I mean before. Last month."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

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

"Who told you that?" demanded Hal sternly.

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

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

"Oh!" murmured Joe, somewhat blankly.

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

"All right. But I thought—"

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"I know, and I'm not kicking, am I? I said it was me because I knew we'd get 'Finis' written all over us if you were out of the game. So what's the use of chewing the rag about it now?"

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

"I don't!"

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

"No, I don't."

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

A SACRIFICE FOR KENTON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," replied Joe listlessly. "Cross was in great form."

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

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

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

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

"Don't worry," said Joe. "I intend to, anyway."

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

"Vote for you for captain."

"Oh, that! Thanks, but you needn't if you'd rather not. I sha'n't mind if you don't. That isn't what I was going to say, though." He tossed the towel aside and, hands in pockets, came over to the window. "Look here, Joe. I haven't been feeling any too easy yesterday and to-day. I thought it was all right to let you take the blame for—for my foolishness because it might mean winning the game to-day. And I guess it did mean that, as it's turned out. But I've sort of

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

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

"And lose the captaincy!"

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

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

"Just the same—"

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“How’s that?” asked Hal suspiciously.

“Forget it!”

“No, sir!”

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

“All right,” he said, “but I don’t get your idea. It isn’t as if you’d done it for me—” He stopped and there was a long

moment of silence. Then he asked brusquely: "You didn't, did you?"

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

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

"You know a lot, don't you?" grumbled Joe sarcastically.

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

"Well—but no speeches, Hal!"

"Nary a spooch!"

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

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

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

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

"Kenton? Kenton wasn't in it, you idiot! Wilder played—"

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

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