

Ralph Henry Barbour



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THE PLAY THAT WON

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When the knock came Ted was slumped on his spine in the Morris chair, the green-shaded lamp beside him and a magazine propped on his chest. It was Saturday night and study was not imperative, for which he was grateful. The baseball game with Prospect Hill in the afternoon had been a hard one, and the victory—for Warwick had won in the tenth—had left him rather tired, and he had passed up a lecture in the school auditorium in favor of rest and solitude at home. Which is why the knock on the door brought a sigh and a frown. Of course, he might remain silent, but the light shining through the transom would be a give-away, and the caller might be Trevor Corwin with his everlasting stamp album: Trev was a sensitive kid and easily hurt. So Ted laid down his magazine and said “Come in!” in no very enthusiastic tone. To his relief, the visitor was Hal Saunders.

“Hello, Bowman,” said Hal, glancing about the study. “George around?” His eyes sought the darkened bedroom as he closed the door behind him.

“Gone home over Sunday,” replied Ted.

“Gone home!” Hal’s tone held so much of dismay that Ted wondered.

“Yes, his father’s been sick for about a week or so, and he got leave from faculty. Went right after the game.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Hal worriedly. “He didn’t say anything to me about it. I wish I’d known. I want to see him about—something important.” To Ted’s discomfiture he seated

himself on the window-seat and moodily stared at the lamp. "When's he coming back?"

"Monday. He got permission to cut morning hours. I guess he will be on the twelve-forty-six."

"That'll be too late," said Hal aggrievedly. "By Jove, that's rotten! I don't see why he couldn't let folks know he was going."

Evidently overwhelmed by the news, he made no move to depart. He was a good-looking fellow of sixteen, well-made, tall and lithe, with light hair and eyes and a fair complexion which even three months of baseball had failed to darken. In contrast, the boy in the Morris chair was a year younger, shorter, heavier, more compact, with dark eyes and hair and a face which, if not handsome, was rather attractive in spite of the fact that sun and weather had tanned it to the hue of leather and that the tip of the nose was peeling. Both boys were members of the School Nine, Ted being right fielder and Hal first-choice pitcher. They were not, however, very good friends. Ted thought Hal traded too much on his ability as a twirler. It was undeniable that he was an exceptionally good one, perhaps the best that the school had ever had, but in Ted's opinion Hal would do well to forget the fact now and then. He didn't understand what his room-mate, George Tempest, saw in Hal to admire; that is, beyond his playing. Naturally George, being captain of the team, would feel kindly toward a chap who so often pitched to victory, but he needn't overdo it! Ted was fond of his room-mate and so it is possible that jealousy had something to do with his mild dislike of Hal Saunders.

Presently Hal raised his eyes from a frowning contemplation of his shoes and Ted was surprised at the trouble shown in his face. It was a most unusual thing for the self-satisfied, rather superior Hal Saunders to exhibit anything approaching discomposure. In spite of himself, Ted's sympathies were touched. "Was it something about the Team?" he asked.

Hal shook his head. "No, it was—something——" He hesitated. Then: "I wanted to borrow some money from him."

"Oh!" murmured Ted. It was, he reflected, a lot like Hal to make a fuss about an unimportant matter like that. Perhaps the other read the thought, for he suddenly said defensively:

"I'm in a dickens of a hole, Bowman, and I was pretty sure that George could help me out. Now I'm blessed if I know what to do!"

"Won't Monday do?"

"Monday morning might, but Monday afternoon will be too late—unless——" Hal fell into silence again. Ted wondered if Hal was trying to find courage to ask him for a loan. He almost hoped so. It would be rather a pleasure to refuse it. "It's Plaister, in the village," Hal went on after a moment. "He's got a bill of twelve dollars and eighty cents against me. I've been owing the old skinflint some of it since last year. And now he says that if it isn't paid by to-night he will go and get the money from 'Jerry.' And you know what that will mean!"

Ted did know. "Jerry" was the popular name for Doctor Morris, the Principal, and when "Jerry" learned that Hal had transgressed the very strict rule against having bills at the

village stores, punishment would be swift and stern. Why, Hal might be dismissed from school! The very least that would happen to him would be probation!

"Maybe he's just bluffing," offered Ted, but with little conviction in his voice.

"No such luck," answered Hal. "He's threatened twice before and I've begged him off. This time he means it. I found a letter from him in the mail this noon. I was going to speak to George before the game, but there wasn't any chance, and I—I sort of funkyed it anyway. Besides, I thought there was time enough. Plaister won't do anything until Monday. I was pretty sure George had the money and I guess he'd have let me have it. I meant to beat it over to the village right after chapel Monday morning. I hadn't any idea he was going away!"

"Too bad," said Ted, more than half meaning it. "How the dickens did you ever manage to run up a bill like that, Saunders?"

Hal shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I'm always buying fool things. Plaister was keen enough to charge 'em until he had a nice big bill against me. Afterwards, too. It got so I was afraid not to buy anything he showed me for fear he'd ask me to pay up."

"But you get an allowance——"

"A dollar a week," said Hal slightly. "How far does that go? Mother sends me a little now and then. If she didn't I wouldn't have a cent in my pocket, ever. I'm a fool about money, and dad knows it. And he will know it a heap better about next Tuesday!"

"But look here, Saunders. Won't Plaister stand to lose if he goes to 'Jerry?' Faculty always says that shop-keepers giving credit to the fellows will be deprived of the school trade. Seems to me Plaister will think twice before he risks that."

"Oh, he will tell some hard-luck yarn and 'Jerry' will believe him. You know how 'Jerry' is. Barks a lot, but doesn't bite much. Yes, he might be scared to do what he threatens, but his letter sounded mighty earnest. He's got me going, anyway. I say, Bowman, I don't suppose you—er—happen to have ten dollars you'd let me have? I'd have to pay it back fifty cents a week, but——"

"Sorry," said Ted, shaking his head. To his surprise he found that he really was sorry—a little. Hal's gloom enwrapped him again.

"No, I suppose not. And I don't guess you'd care much about lending to me if you had it. You don't particularly love me. Well, I guess I'll toddle." He arose and stood uncertainly a moment before he moved toward the door.

"What will you do?" asked Ted anxiously. "If—if you get put on 'pro' we'll be in a nasty fix! Hang it, Saunders, you've got to do something, you know. Crouch would last about two innings in the Temple game! Why don't you see Plaister tomorrow and get him to wait another week? After next Saturday it wouldn't matter."

"I've talked to him until I'm tired," replied Hal wearily. "It's no good. Maybe he won't do it, or maybe I can scrape up the money by Monday. I'm tired worrying about it. I'd just as lief get fired as have this thing hanging over me all the time."

“Maybe he would take part of it and wait for the rest.”

“He won’t. I tried that. He says he’s waited long enough and—oh, a lot of drivel. You know the way they talk. Well, good-night. And say, Bowman, just keep this to yourself, like a good chap, will you? I don’t know why I bothered you with it, but I’d rather you didn’t say anything about it.”

“That’s all right. I won’t talk. Good-night. I hope you—come out all right.”

Hal nodded dejectedly and went. Ted took up his magazine, but after finding his place in it he let it drop once more. If Plaister did what he threatened, and Ted knew the hard-featured little shop-keeper well enough to feel pretty certain that he would, it would be all up with Warwick’s chances for the baseball championship that year. With Hal Saunders in the points they might defeat Temple Academy next Saturday. Without him they couldn’t. Neither Crouch nor Bradford was good enough to last three innings against the Blue’s hard-hitting team. The knowledge brought real dismay to Ted. Personally he wanted a victory for the school team, but it was the thought of George’s disappointment that moved him most. George, like every captain, had hoped and worked for a triumph harder than any of the others. For Ted’s part, he would go back next year, but this was George’s last chance. Ted was miserably sorry for his friend. He was such a corking fine fellow. Ted recalled the day last September when George, learning that fate in the shape of faculty had wished a strange and two years younger boy on him as room-mate, had acted so mighty decent about it. Lots of fellows in George’s place, thought Ted, would have been mad and grouchy, but George had

never let Ted guess for a moment that he wasn't entirely welcome. And all through the year George had been a perfect brick. He had helped Ted in many ways: had got him into Plato Society, helped him at mid-year exams, introduced him to nice fellows, coached him in batting until he had become proficient enough to beat out Whipple for right field position. Ted's feeling for George Tempest was a mingling of gratitude and hero-worship that amounted to a very real affection, and the thought of George's unhappiness in case the final game of the school year went against Warwick troubled him greatly. Temple Academy had routed Warwick overwhelmingly last year and the sting of that defeat still remained. Warwick wanted revenge, and her three hundred and odd students had their hearts set on obtaining it next Saturday. But to none did it mean quite what it meant to Captain Tempest. Ted tossed the magazine aside and stood up. "Something ought to be done," he muttered.

In the bedroom he produced a small tin box from its hiding place in a dresser drawer and emptied the contents on his bed. Three one-dollar bills and many silver coins, when counted, came to exactly fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents. He had been accumulating the hoard ever since Fall with the intention of buying a bicycle when he went home in the Summer. When he had about five dollars more he would have enough. He hadn't told Hal that he didn't have the money. He had merely politely refused to make a loan. And he had no idea of changing his mind. Hal's fix was no affair of his, and Hal could get out of it as best he might. Certainly he couldn't be expected to give up a whole

Summer's fun for the sake of a fellow he didn't like much anyway! Resolutely he placed the money back in the box and the box again in concealment. "He will wriggle out of it somehow," he said to himself.

Sunday was rainy and seemed weeks long, and Ted missed George horribly. He saw Hal Saunders at dinner and again in the evening, and it was apparent from Hal's countenance that he had not yet found a way out of his difficulty. Ted went over to the library after supper feeling very angry with Hal, angry because that youth had endangered the success of the nine, because his foolishness was in a fair way to bring grief to George, and because he had somehow managed to make one Ted Bowman distinctly uncomfortable! Ted surrounded himself with reference books, but all the work he did scarcely paid for the effort.

Ted did not say anything to George, when the latter returned on Monday, about Hal's affairs. After dinner that day he received a summons to the Office, and although conscious of a clear conscience he couldn't help feeling a trifle uneasy as he obeyed it. One didn't get an invitation to confer with "Jerry" unless the matter was one of some importance. Events subsequently justified the uneasiness, for when Ted closed the Office door behind him the second time he was on probation!

He could have stood his misfortune better had George been decently sympathetic, but George was disgusted and mad clear through. "You've no right to do silly stunts when you're on the team," he stormed. "You've got a duty toward the School. A fine thing, isn't it, to get on 'pro' four days before the big game?"

"Well, you don't think I *asked* for it, do you?" demanded Ted indignantly. "Don't you suppose I wanted to play Saturday just as much as anyone?"

"Then you might have behaved yourself. You know perfectly well that Billy Whipple can't hit the way you can. What did you do, anyway?"

"Nothing much. I didn't really do anything, only 'Jerry' thinks I did and I can't—can't prove that I didn't!"

"That's likely," grunted George. "You must have done something."

"All right, then, I did. Anyhow, it doesn't matter whether I did or didn't. I'm out of the game. I'm sorry——"

George withered him with a look and slammed the door as he went out.

After that life was hardly worth living, Ted thought. George scarcely spoke to him and the rest of his former team-mates were not much more cordial. In fact the whole school apparently viewed him as a traitor, and he felt like one. Thursday morning Dr. Morris announced that hereafter the students were not to make purchases at Plaister's, and Ted found a certain ungenerous comfort in the shop-keeper's misfortune. In the afternoon, while he was studying in his room—he had avoided the ball field since Monday—Hal came in with George. For some reason Hal appeared to view Ted more leniently than the other players did, perhaps because, having so nearly attained probation himself, he had sympathy for a brother offender. Hal's greeting was almost cordial. George's was only a grunt. Ted pretended to study, but he was really listening to the talk of the others. Presently Hal said indignantly:

"I wonder what they've got against Plaister, George. It's a shame to shut down on him like that."

"Some chap's run up a bill, probably," answered George indifferently. "Faculty was after him last year for giving credit."

"Well, I'm sorry. The old codger's mighty white, and I ought to know it if anybody should. I owed him something over twelve dollars, some of it since last year, and he came down on me hard last week and said that if I didn't pay right up he'd go to 'Jerry.' He had me scared stiff, and that's no dream! I had visions of being fired, or at least put on 'pro,' and so I came over here Saturday night to see if I could get some money from you. I had only about two dollars to my name. But you had gone home. Bowman offered to loan it to me"—Hal winked at Ted's startled countenance and grinned—"but I wouldn't take it. I tried at least a dozen other fellows, but every last one was stoney broke. I expected all day Monday to get an invitation to the Office——"

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," interrupted George regretfully. "I could have fixed you up. Better let me do it now."

"Not for anything," laughed Hal. "You see the old chap never showed up and I had my nervous prostration for nothing. All he did do was to send me the bill Tuesday morning—receipted!"

"Receipted!"

"Yep, paid in full! Just scratched it right off his books. I suppose he thought he might as well. Afraid to get in wrong with faculty, maybe. Still, it was pretty decent of him, wasn't it? Of course I'll pay him as soon as I can, but he doesn't know that."

George agreed that it was decent indeed, but he looked somewhat puzzled. The incident didn't tally at all with his conception of Mr. Jabez Plaister.

Saturday dawned breathlessly hot, and the game, set for two o'clock, was postponed until three. The wait was hard on the nerves of the players, and Billy Whipple, who was to play right field in place of Ted, was plainly unsettled. Ted knew of no reason why he should not enjoy the painful pleasure of watching the game, and so, when Loring, the Temple Academy pitcher, wound himself up for the first delivery, Ted was seated cross-legged under the rope behind third base with a very disconsolate expression on his perspiring countenance. To-day the consciousness of virtue failed more than ever to atone for his being out of the game. He strove to find consolation in the reflection that there was another year coming, but the attempt was a flat failure.

The heat had its effect on spectators and players alike. The cheering and singing lacked "pep" and the rival teams comported themselves as though their one desire was to get back to the shade of the benches. Ted glowered and muttered at the slowness of the contest. In the first two innings only a long fly by the Temple second baseman that was neatly captured by Whipple and a couple of inexcusable and innocuous errors livened the dreariness of the game. The third inning began like the preceding ones but promised better when, in the last half of it, Warwick got a man to second on the first clean hit of the game. The Brown's cheerers came to life then and, although the next batter fouled to catcher, making the second out, Warwick paid for

the vocal encouragement by putting the first run across on a hit past third.

Temple got men on third and second bases in the first of the fourth and tried hard to bring them home, but Hal Saunders, having allowed a hit and walked a batsman, retrieved himself and saved the situation by knocking down a hard liner that was well above his head. Very coolly and leisurely he picked it up, while the man on third scuttled to the plate, and threw out the batsman at first.

The fifth inning went better. The air had cooled perceptibly and both Hal and Loring were now twirling real ball and the game was becoming a pitchers' battle pure and simple. When Hal got down to business, hits became as scarce as hen's teeth, nor was Loring much behind him in effectiveness to-day. Batters stepped to the plate, swung or waited and retired with trailing bat. One-two-three was the order. The game went into the seventh with Warwick's one-run lead looking very large. Ted, his disappointments forgotten, was "rooting" hard and tirelessly behind third. Temperature was now a matter of no moment. Warwick was ahead, Hal was mowing 'em down and victory was hovering above the brown banner!

It was in her half of the seventh that Temple evened up the score. With two gone and first base inviolate Temple's third man up, her chunky little tow-headed shortstop whose clever playing had frequently won applause from friend and foe, waited cannily and let Hal waste two deliveries. Then he swung at a wide one and missed. The next was another ball, although it cut the corner of the plate, and, with the score against him, Hal tried to bring the tow-headed youth's

agony to a merciful end by sneaking over a fast and straight one. But the shortstop outguessed him that time. There was a mighty *crack* and away arched the ball. And away sped the batsman. Probably he had small hope of safety, for the sphere was making straight for the right fielder, but he knew enough not to jump to conclusions. Which is why, when the ball bounded from Whipple's hands, the runner was almost at second. Urged on by the delighted coaches, he slid into third a few inches ahead of the ball.

What caused Whipple's error I do not know. He had the sun in his eyes, of course, but he had made a harder catch under like circumstances in the second inning. But better men than young Whipple have done the same and so we needn't waste time trying to find an excuse for him. The mischief was done, and four minutes later the Temple captain had tied up the score with a Texas Leaguer back of third.

There were no more hits in the seventh and none in the eighth. In the ninth Temple almost won by a scratch and an error after Hal had lammed an inshoot against a batsman's ribs and he had reached second on a sacrifice bunt. But the error, while it took him to third, did no more, and Hal settled down and struck out his tenth man.

Warwick got one runner to second in her half, but he died there and the contest went into extra innings. By this time the sun was behind the trees at the edge of the field and a faint breeze was stirring. Ted was parched of throat and hoarse of voice and was alternately hopeful and despairing. The tenth inning went the way of the others. Hal had two more strike-outs to his credit and Loring one. In the eleventh